

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas Sankara Speaks

The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–1987

BY THOMAS SANKARA

Reviewed by: Ahmed Azad

The Voice of a Revolutionary

Thomas Sankara was brutally assassinated on October 15, 1987. Those who were implicated in that dastardly deed included Blaise Compaore, his closest friend and comrade. Sankara was only 37 when he was killed and had been in power for four years. Yet his death touched millions of people in Burkina Faso, Africa, Cuba, Nicaragua and other parts of the World.

This collection of speeches and interviews which span the period from March 9, 1983 to October 1987 gives the reader an insight into his ideas and personality. It covers a wide spectrum of questions relating to fundamental ideas on revolution, Marxism-Leninism, culture and internationalism.

Reading this book one is deeply moved by some of the speeches, as indeed his audiences were. He spoke in order to help clarify fundamental issues and problems confronting the revolutionary process in his country. Since he was concerned to move people into action, the speeches inevitably contain rhetorical declarations and hyperbole.

What impresses the reviewer are his constant references to the relationship of the revolution and the active involvement of the masses. Power, he said must be conquered above all by a conscious people. For him a revolution is genuine “because it draws on the strength, the richness and the invincibility of the masses” (p.234). Sankara recognised that the peasantry, which makes up the largest part of the population, is a key force. In his concrete political actions he constantly sought to redress the pauperisation of the peasantry.

However, he had an overtly critical attitude towards the petty-bourgeoisie, and towards leading people from the trade union movement and other left-wing parties. One gets the impression that for Sankara you were either for the revolution or against it. But this blanket black or white approach had serious weaknesses. Experience teaches that in every revolutionary process there are large groups of people, including from the peasantry and the working class, who remain passive. They have to be won over by conscious political and ideological work, otherwise they could throw in their lot with the forces of neo-colonialism, imperialism and reaction.

Sankara placed great emphasis on the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution. The CDR's were organised at all the workplaces and in all neighbourhoods and military units. In creating the CDRs Sankara was concerned that they should be the defenders of the revolution. In his words:

“He who speaks of revolution without taking the necessary measures to protect it makes a serious error and misunderstands the capacity for fighting and destruction of the forces of reaction” (p.166).

Abuses and Mistakes

In this speech, Sankara dealt in an honest and forthright manner with the serious abuses and mistakes committed by elements within the CDRs. He called for unity, criticism and self-criticism, and the discarding of slogans and opportunism. The speech, given to the First National Conference of the CDRs, makes stirring reading. One can feel the electric atmosphere generated by that speech and parts of it are Sankara at his best.

Yet it was sadly deficient in other respects. No real attempt it seems was made in that speech and in practice to resolve the issue of the role. Functions, duties and responsibilities of the CDRs and those of the trade union movement. The trade unions felt aggrieved that the CDRs were usurping their functions. Moreover some leaders of the trade union movement had a history of working class struggle against the previous neo-colonial regimes and they resented the fact that young people with no or very little experience of work and trade unionism seemed to be lording it over them. This does not mean that on all issues the trade unions were correct. Far from it. But there was undoubtedly confrontation and conflict between the government and the trade unions.

Notwithstanding the mistakes and weaknesses (which revolutionary process is free of mistakes and weaknesses?) Sankara, as this book brings out, was a genuine revolutionary, sincere in his endeavours to improve the lot of his people and to involve the masses in all levels of political activity. He was unjustly accused of seeking to foment trouble and revolution in other countries. This was an imperialist orchestrated campaign to discredit Sankara. In an interview in 1984, Sankara said, “Revolution can’t be exported” and characterised the notion that it could be exported as “a counter-revolutionary view of pseudo revolutionaries, proclaimed by the bookish dogmatic petty bourgeois” (p.72).

In both theory and practical political life Sankara sought to redress the injustices and inequality suffered by women. One of his finest speeches was the one he made to thousands of women on March 8, 1987 in the capital Ouagadougou. Titled “The Revolution Cannot Triumph Without the Emancipation of Women”, the speech analyzes the historical genesis of women’s oppression and subjugation using Engels’ methodological approach. In dealing with his own country he mercilessly exposes how men treat women, how single mothers and educated women suffer social disapproval and discrimination, and how women who are the source of life still remain “invisible, faceless and voteless” and are still “in chains, shadow of the male shadow” (p.212).

The Burkinabe government under Sankara took serious steps to eliminate practices that demean women such as prostitution, vagrancy, forced marriages and female circumcision.

Internationalism

This book contains many speeches made by Sankara in which he passionately attacks imperialism and unequivocally expresses his solidarity with Cuba, Nicaragua, the PLO and our struggle in South Africa. Cuba, he said, “is very close to us” and his last speech, a week before his death, was a tribute to Che Guevara. As Sankara said, “You cannot kill ideas; ideas do not die. That is why Che Guevara -an embodiment of revolutionary ideas, of self-sacrifice -is not dead” (p.21]).

The struggle against apartheid South Africa was very dear to him, and he offered political, diplomatic and material support to the ANC. In his speech on the emancipation of women he quoted from the song our women sang on August 9, 1956: “You have touched the woman, you have struck a rock. You have dislodged a boulder, you will be crushed” (p.227). After the death of Samora Machel, Sankara laid the blame squarely at the door of the racist regime and imperialism.

In his speech to the Eighth Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement held in Harare on September 3, 1986, Sankara dealt with the terrible problem of the debt. He called for the non-payment of the debt and for united action on the part of the non-aligned movement to deal with this crisis which is ruining the economies of so many developing countries. At that conference US imperialism was organizing to prevent Nicaragua from hosting the next conference. In supporting Nicaragua, Sankara pointed out how that country had suffered more than his own and now “more than any other country today (it) knows the price of non-alignment. It pays daily in blood and sweat for its courageous choices” (p.191).

Sankara was an ebullient figure, ready to discuss and debate any issue with his own people and with foreigners. In his four brief years as President he matured as a revolutionary and leader, proclaiming himself Marxist-Leninist. Unfortunately he was gunned down in the prime of his youth and denied the possibility of developing further. Had he lived, he had the potential to emerge as one of Africa’s greatest revolutionary leaders. His revolutionary legacy will continue to inspire people in Burkina Faso, Africa and other parts of the world.

For anyone wishing to understand the ideas that motivated Sankara and which gave flesh and blood to the revolution in Burkina Faso this book is a must. It is a tragedy of our continent that linguistic differences prevent us from knowing and appreciating what is going on in different parts of our continent. It is a pity that those Africans, who do not read French should only now have Sankara’s works available in English. Pathfinder Press has done a service by producing this book, but we revolutionaries in Africa have to give serious consideration to overcoming the language barrier.