

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Signs and Symbols of Change

Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso
(formerly Upper Volta)
7 January 1985

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
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Dear Peter,

The evolution of the Republic of Upper Volta into Burkina Faso, or the Republic of Burkina, has been an interesting one to witness.

The current government came to power on 4 August 1983, the eve of the country's anniversary of independence. (Upper Volta obtained final independence from France on 5 August 1960.) The "Conseil National de la Révolution (CNR)" (National Council of the Revolution) was established as the ruling body of government. Captain Thomas Sankara became President of the CNR, and hence head of state.

This change in government is just one of several since the country's independence. The first civilian government, headed by Maurice Yameogo, lasted until 1966. In 1966 Lieutenant-Colonel (later General) Sangoule Lamizana became head of state following a military takeover. Lamizana remained President of the country during a series of governments that alternated between military and civilian control. On 25 November 1980 a coup led by Colonel Saye Zerbo overthrew Lamizana's government. This military government lasted until another military coup occurred on 7 November 1982. The government established in late 1982 was headed by Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo, with Thomas Sankara serving as Prime Minister. On 17 May 1983, Sankara was arrested and removed from his position. Three days later, there were demonstrations in the streets of Ouagadougou, the capital, calling for Sankara's release. Sankara was removed from prison and placed under house arrest on June 9th. In June 1983 Ouedraogo lifted the curfew that had been in effect since the previous November, and announced plans for a return to a civilian government. On the evening of 4 August, supporters of Sankara took control of the government.

Sankara announced, with the creation of the new government, the beginning of the "Révolution Démocratique et Populaire (RDP)" (Democratic and Popular Revolution). The current government has interpreted Sankara's arrest on 17 May 1983 and the subsequent public demonstrations on his behalf as an important turning point for the political left, bringing together the revolutionary movement. Sankara's arrest revealed to the leftists the "pro-imperialistic" and "reactionary" nature of Ouedraogo's government. The events of 17 May 1983 constituted, according to current interpretations, a "fascist coup d'état", whereas those of 4 August 1983 were not a "coup", but the beginnings of the Revolution.

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The first months of the Revolution were spent consolidating political power, and mobilizing support. The possibility of mercenaries entering the country and staging a counter-coup emerged as a major concern in late October 1983. Training of military personnel -- including, for the first time, women -- was stepped up. Civilian Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) were established throughout the country, in workplaces, urban residential neighborhoods, and rural villages. CDRs were seen as the means by which the population would be mobilized in support of the Revolution and political activities decentralized. As the months progressed, CDR members and government civil servants were given military training. This general militarization was seen as important for preventing the possibility of a reactionary takeover, so that the people would be able to defend the Revolution should it become necessary. Military training was also seen as a means by which the power of the military would be demystified -- the people would learn that the military were interested in defending the Revolution and developing the country -- working with, rather than oppressing, the people. Mobilization of support for the government proceeded most quickly in Ouagadougou, particularly among the youth.

With time, the political situation generally stabilized. In March 1983, the curfew -- from 11 PM to 5 AM -- was relaxed: the current curfew hours are from 1 AM to 5 PM. At the same time, however, the "Zone of Security" around the Residence (the Presidential offices) was enlarged and fortified.

The government had reasons to be concerned. On 27 May 1983, a coup plot was uncovered, the day before the coup had been planned. There was no official announcement of the arrests made until 10 June, when a government radio report stated that twenty military officers and civilians had been arrested. Two days later, Radio Upper Volta announced that seven of the coup plotters had been executed by firing squad on the evening of the 11th, five others sentenced to prison and hard labor, and the rest released. The killings perturbed many Voltaic citizens: until quite recently, political changes in the country have been bloodless and political opponents had been subjected to prison sentences or house arrest.

The basic principles of the Revolution were laid out in the political treatise, the "Discours d'Orientation Politique" (Discourse of Political Orientation), issued on 2 October 1983. The government stressed how its priorities would focus on assuring all citizens the basic necessities of life -- food, water, shelter, health, and education. Agricultural development, to work towards the country's self-sufficiency in food, was given top priority. The need for women to participate as equal partners in the Revolution was also emphasized. Citizens were also exhorted to count on their own efforts, rather than those of others, to bring about these changes.

This emphasis on self-development is a marked change from that of previous governments. As one of the poorest countries in the world, Upper Volta had received much international development assistance in recent years, particularly following the serious Sahelian drought of the early 1970's. But much of this aid has not brought about productive development. In addition, the government recognizes that with the current world economic situation, foreign assistance is becoming less generous than in the past.

Gradually changes were introduced into the country. 1983 began with the first of the Tribunaux Populaires de la Révolution (TPRs) (Popular Tribunals of the Revolution). These trials were to judge individuals accused of crimes against the people, principally abuses of power under past governments. The government announced that the accused were to have no rights to legal representation or appeal, and that sentences might consist of confiscation of property or jail terms, but that no one would be executed. The first person to be tried was former President Lamizana. His trial began on 3 January 1983, a national holiday, and the proceedings were held in the Maison du Peuple (the House of the People), which was packed with witnesses and spectators. The trial was broadcast live on national radio. Lamizana was, after three days of testimony, acquitted of charges of misuse of government funds. Although Lamizana had produced numerous receipts for expenditures, millions of francs CFA (thousands of dollars) were left unaccounted for. Lamizana explained that some expenditures were -- by law -- state secrets that he could not divulge. Numerous people had testified on his behalf, citing how Lamizana had given them assistance in time of need. One man, for example, recounted how Lamizana had given him peanuts when he was a boy. Another told how Lamizana had given him money when there was a death in the family. Lamizana assured the trial that he had no money stashed away in European banks, but merely owned one house and two vehicles, and was living on his military pension.

Other trials followed, and have been continuing up to the present. Although some of the accused were as fortunate as Lamizana and were acquitted, most were not. In some cases individuals were suspended from their jobs, others were given suspended jail sentences and fined, and others sent to jail. Halfway through the year, 126 people had been tried in fifteen separate trials; 94 were found guilty, 30 acquitted, and 2 cases were dismissed due to the deaths of the accused. Monetary fines for the convicted had amounted to almost 7 billion francs CFA (\$16 million), of which close to 3 billion francs were already recovered by the government by late July, with the rest as seized goods. As the months went by and the number tried by the TPRs grew, much of the country's population was affected -- as many had friends, or relatives, among the accused. In late April, one soldier committed suicide the night before his trial was to start.

After the tribunals were launched, other signs of change began to appear. In March, the government arrested three leaders of the national teacher's union. Union members went out on strike in support of their leaders. Trade unions have historically been very important in Voltaic politics, so the strike constituted a showdown between the trade unionists and government supporters. The government decided to fire all teachers who had taken part in the strike; estimates ranged from 1,000 to 2,000 people. The government announced that it would train "revolutionary teachers" to take their places. Later on in the year, however, it was decided that individual teachers wanting to re-apply for their jobs could do so, but they would first have to undertake an auto-critique of how their actions had been counter-revolutionary, and their applications would be individually considered for merit.

The press was also mobilized to work in support of the Revolution. In early April a new daily newspaper, Sidwaya, was started in Ouagadougou. The

launching of the new daily coincided with the Seminaire international sur l'information, held 2-6 April, in Ouagadougou. The new paper was started by the government General Direction of the Written Press, part of the Ministry of Information. The paper's name, Sidwaya, means "The truth comes..." in More, the language of the Mossi, or dominant, ethnic group in the country. The paper billed itself as the "Voltaic Daily of Information and of Mobilisation of the People". A sister publication, Carrefour Africain (African Crossroads), is a weekly that has also been published by the government since 1959.

Both publications grew increasingly critical of L'Observateur (The Observer), an independent daily newspaper that had been published since 1973. L'Observateur was attacked for its lack of revolutionary orientation. In mid-May, L'Observateur published a front-page editorial defending itself and the principle of freedom of the press. In mid-June, the offices of L'Observateur burned, putting the paper out of commission. Rumors attributed the fire to arson, perhaps by over-zealous supporters of the Revolution. An official explanation was never offered, and the paper has never reopened.

The government introduced rent controls for all citizens, which went into effect on 1 April 1984. Limits on the maximum rents that could be charged were imposed, based on the building's location, floor space, and existing utilities, i.e., running water and electricity. These rent controls were seen as a way to help assure all citizens the opportunity to affordable housing, and as a way of limiting the possibilities for entrepreneurs to exploit the masses. In another measure, the government lowered school fees charged for each schoolchild, by reducing the amount of rent paid to the landlords of the school buildings. In various parts of the country, CDRs also tried to insure the availability of affordable food for the population, by trying to insist that merchants buy and sell cereal staples, such as millet and sorghum, at the same prices as the government cereal board.

In working towards decentralization of the government, the state bureaucratic structure was reorganized from 11 departments into 25 provinces. As the country's vehicle license plates were tied into this administrative system, the government announced in the spring of 1984 that everyone would have to get new registration numbers for their vehicles. This re-registration process quickly became chaotic, as offices were overrun with applicants and understaffed. After a couple of months, the re-registration process was suspended. Various rumors circulated as to why it had been stopped. One rumor was that the new license plate series, which used "V" instead of "HV" to identify the country, had run into international conflicts -- as "V" was reserved for Venezuela (or as an alternative rumor went, the Vatican). Another rumor was that the country's name was going to be changed.

Preparations were begun months in advance to celebrate the First Anniversary of the Revolution. The week preceding the "4 Août" (August 4th) celebrations all government offices worked only half-days, so that civil servants could devote their afternoons to preparing for the festivities. Numerous events were scheduled for a ten-day period -- parades, concerts, dances, and meetings. A few days before the 4th, rumors about the country's name change grew more persistent.

Finally, in a speech on August 3rd, Sankara announced the country's new name -- Burkina Faso, or the Republic of Burkina. Burkina is a More word, expressing a concept that is rather difficult to translate. It signifies "dignity", "integrity", "incorruptibility", "honesty", "heritage", or "patrimony". Faso is a Jula word that connotes "country (of origin)", "natal home", or "organized community". The country's name, Burkina Faso, is thus variously interpreted to mean the "country of upright, or dignified, men (people)", the "country of honest people", the "land of patriotic people", or simply, the "country of good people". The term "burkinabè" was also coined: "bè" is a suffix used in Fulfade (Peul) to connote a plural form, referring to more than one person. Consequently, the citizens of Burkina-Faso are now collectively referred to as "burkinabè". Burkinabè is used either as a collective noun or as an adjective.

The creation of the new names draws from the three most widely spoken languages in the country -- Moré, Jula, and Fulfade. More is most widely spoken in the region around Ouagadougou, in the center of the country, whereas Fulfade is most common in the northern region, and Jula in the southwestern area.

Initial reactions to the name change were mixed. Since the country's population belongs to over sixty different ethnic groups, the use of three local languages alienated some of those who came from different ethnic backgrounds. The country's name was also shortened: many Moré speakers in the Ouagadougou region refer simply to Burkina, whereas Jula speakers around Bobo-Dioulasso use the term Faso. With time it seems most people have gradually grown accustomed to the new name.

This name change was one of several important symbolic changes made on August 4th. It was felt that the symbols of the past governments -- the neo-colonial regimes of the country's first twenty-three years of independence -- needed to be replaced with symbols that reflected the new revolutionary spirit of the country.

The former name, Upper Volta, had been a geographical designation given to the area by former French colonial administrators. Upper Volta referred to the upper reaches of the Volta River (Volta being the name of an explorer) -- the Black Volta, Red Volta, and White Volta. (All three tributaries originate in the country, enter Ghana and join to form the Volta River, which eventually enters the Atlantic Ocean.) As Sankara explained in an interview, this colonial designation "signifies nothing for us".

A new national flag was introduced on August 4th. The previous flag consisted of three horizontal stripes -- red, white, and black -- to represent the three Volta rivers. From a distance, the old flag looked very similar to the French tricolor, which consists of vertical stripes of red, white, and dark navy. The new flag consists of two horizontal bands -- red on top, green on the bottom, with a bright gold star in the center. These three colors -- red, gold, and green -- are used in the flags of several West African countries, including neighboring Mali and Ghana.

The flag design must have been widely circulated in advance, for there were new flags everywhere on the 4th. In addition, many CDR groups marching

in the parades wore uniforms utilizing the three new colors -- for example, green T-shirts with red scarves, or red and green hats with gold stars. Some wore outfits made from new commemorative fabrics printed by VOLTEX, the country's cotton fabric manufacturer, in the new colors.

In contrast, the name change was a more closely-guarded secret until the last couple of days. For a few weeks after the 4th, it was unclear exactly how the new name was to be spelled. Many people used the spelling "Bourkina Fasso", until the government had a press conference and announced the correct spelling. A gradual phase-in of the country's name was also authorized. During a five-month transitional period, until 31 December 1984, organizations could use up all of their old forms imprinted with "Haute-Volta", while awaiting new ones. Many government organizations, parastatals, and even private businesses had to change their names, if Haute-Volta or Voltaïque was part of their old names. For example, the electric company, Société Voltaïque d'Électricité, known as VOLTELEC, was renamed the Société Nationale d'Électricité au Burkina, or SONABEL. This meant changing not only stationary, but also organization logos and signs. VOLTELEC's red-and-black electric bolt symbol was replaced by a green-and-red electric bolt, with a gold star in the middle. Many government installations, signs, and war monuments had to be repainted in the new colors. The first Burkina Faso postage stamps did not begin to appear until early November.

On August 4th a new national anthem was adopted, based on the revolutionary motto -- "La Patrie ou la Mort, Nous Vaincrons !" (The Country or Death, We Will Conquer !). Some major streets in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso were "debaptized" and then renamed. A Ouagadougou boulevard named after French General Binger was renamed in honor of Nelson Mandela, the imprisoned South African opponent of apartheid. The "Boulevard de Gouverneur General Eboue" in Bobo-Dioulasso was renamed "La Boulevard de la Revolution".

In Ouagadougou, right before the August 4th celebrations, curious little yellow diamond-shaped signs, marked with "X9" in black, began appearing all over town. The signs were to mark bus stops. The country had never before had city bus service. For the August 4th festivities, Ghanaian buses were borrowed to handle the anticipated flux of visitors. On the 4th itself, bus rides were free. A few months later, the country's own buses arrived, drivers were trained to operate them, and regular bus service began. As the bus fare is 75 francs CFA (16¢) per person -- versus a minimum of 200-300 francs CFA (43-64¢) per person for a taxi ride in Ouagadougou -- the bus is a cheaper form of public transport, particularly for those living in the outlying areas. While Ouagadougou buses may often have only a handful of passengers at midday, buses on certain routes are packed at rush hour.

A big painted billboard in downtown Ouagadougou depicts some of the other hoped-for advantages of the bus system. The billboard shows "today" -- a clean modern street with only one bus on it, with passengers climbing aboard -- versus "yesterday" -- a crowded street, with a car about to collide with a motorcycle and a bicycle. As cars are extremely expensive here, due to high tax rates, most people who can afford any vehicles ride small motorcycles (125 cc. engines, or less), mopeds (49 cc. engines), or bicycles. Traffic is congested and insane, and accidents are very frequent.

After the revolutionary anniversary, other new programs for meeting priority needs were announced. A "Programme Populaire de Développement (PPD)" (Popular Program of Development) is scheduled for 1985, in which citizens will be asked to contribute voluntary labor to activities such as building dams and planting trees. Each person is supposed to plant two trees during the rainy season, i.e. July and August. Mobilization of this effort has already started: seed has been collected and simple mini-nurseries set up by CDRs to produce the more than 10 million seedlings that will be needed.

This fall the country's health department and military were engaged in a campaign known as "Vaccination Commando". During a period of approximately ten days, vaccination centers were set up all over the country, to inoculate children under the age of fourteen against diphtheria, tetanus, measles, and yellow fever. While certainly the campaign did not achieve its objective of vaccinating all children, many received vaccinations for the first time in their lives. Since this country has some of the worst health conditions and highest disease rates in the world, the vaccination program was an important effort towards improving general health conditions.

In November and December 1984 attention focused on balancing the national budget. After much discussion as to how the projected deficit of over six billion francs CFA (\$13 million) could be met, a decision was reached to hold public budget hearings. The sessions, held in Ouagadougou, were all-night meetings, attended by over 3000 CDR and labor representatives from all over the country and government officials. The objective was not merely to balance the budget, but to insure a "budget of dignity, justice, and investment". Plans were adopted to cut the salaries and benefits of government civil servants, decreasing two-thirds of the national budget, as well as reducing allowances to students. Consequently, the government should be able to invest some of its own funds in development efforts.

On New Year's Eve, President Sankara gave a speech outlining his concerns for 1985. He warned the Burkinabè people that it was important to remain vigilant against their enemies, both within and outside of the country. He reviewed changes introduced in the past year, and discussed on patriotic sacrifices of the citizens were needed. But, he stressed, the Revolution came not to take from the people, but to give to the people. After expressing various salutations for the New Year, Sankara closed his speech by announcing that "Pour 1985, le logement est déclaré gratuit au Burkina Faso." (For 1985, housing is declared free for Burkina Faso.)

This announcement came as a total surprise -- a virtual bombshell -- to the country. For all Burkinabè citizens, rent payments are to be suspended for the entire year of 1985. Foreigners and commercial establishments continue paying rent, but rent payments will go to the government and not to the landlords. Tenants will be protected: if a landlord tries to evict tenants, the state will seize the building. Landlords must also finish buildings under construction. Tenants, however, will be obliged to maintain the buildings in which they are living. Under certain conditions, landlords' bank loan repayments will be suspended for the year. All leases must be registered with the government within 60 days, but the lease tax for Burkinabè citizens will be waived.

For the past week, people have been talking of nothing else. Renters are elated and landlords are dismayed. Much discussion has centered around the situation of people whose sole source of income -- such as, for example, widows with children -- comes from their rent earnings. The government plans to work out solutions to such "social cases". Pierre Ouedraogo, the Secretary-General of the CDRs, explained that the measure was enacted to insure all Burkinabè access to housing, and also to re-orient investment in the country, into agriculture and other priority sectors. Ouedraogo remarked that building "villas" (Western-style houses with running water and electricity) was not a productive use of capital: "It is well-known," he commented in a radio interview, "that people do not eat villas".

Many of the rental lodgings, however, are not villas, but simple, one-story clay buildings. Typically a series of rooms opens onto a courtyard: the owner and family may use several of the rooms themselves, then rent out individual rooms for 5,000-10,000 francs CFA (\$10-20) a month. Some landlords are more prosperous, and may own several such courtyards, all the units of which are rented out. A prosperous landlord, thus, might be able to easily bring in 600,000 francs CFA (\$1275) a month. For poor renters, it seems outrageous that someone can make this kind of money. (The average per capita income in Burkina Faso is under \$200.) Whereas the decree heartened some of the country's poor, others were disheartened. Was there now to be no possibility of building a second home for rental income, to provide income for retirement or an inheritance for one's children? The decree is only for one year, but what will happen after that -- will the government nationalize housing? No one knows how the situation will evolve.

The new year brought other changes, such as vehicle road taxes (like highway tolls) and taxes on advertising signs. These taxes may be good ideas, but have some peculiar consequences. The road tax system is particularly cumbersome, as police officers must write out receipts, in triplicate, for each tarif collected, noting the vehicle's origin, destination, license plate number, tax paid, date, and the officer's signature. Not only is the process time-consuming, but particularly difficult for the police at 5:30 AM, before the sun is up, to sit outside in the cold and the wind, struggling to keep the carbon paper from blowing away, and write out receipts by the light of a weak flashlight with fading batteries. In the case of the advertising signs, the tax is bringing about their disappearance. When word of this stiff new tax came out, many people went out and ripped down their signs. Now many small shops just have a rectangular patch over their doorways, where the paint is less faded and the sign used to hang. Some larger establishments have replaced huge signs with smaller ones, as the tax will be assessed on sign size. What is happening to the signs -- are they being discarded, or saved in the hopes that the tax may be repealed at some future date?

Since the announcement of the "free rent" decree, the Burkinabè have been waiting and watching for more signs and symbols of what the New Year, and the continuing evolution of the "Democratic and Popular Revolution", will bring.

Sincerely,

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BACKGROUND MATERIAL:

Numerous issues of L'Observateur, Sidwaya, Carrefour Africain, Afrique-Asie, West Africa, and Jeune Afrique; also Newsweek (19 Nov. 84) and South (Aug. 84).