

# Power Must Be Conquered by a Conscious People

August 21, 1983

*On August 21, 1983, Sankara gave his first news conference as president to the international press. The following major excerpts are translated from a transcript of the news conference, which was broadcast live over Upper Volta's national radio station.*

*Question:* Mr. President, August 4 is seen by certain people as an act of revenge against those who held power after May 17. How would you explain it?

*Thomas Sankara:* I, too, have heard this explanation. You have to understand that for some people the Voltaic people's problem is simply a problem of cliques. It is completely normal for such people to see each action as an act of revenge, as a recapturing of positions and so on.

For us, August 4 was simply the logical outcome — the concretization — of the popular will that you have been able to witness yourselves here in Upper Volta.

We say, too, that all those who mobilized in Ouagadougou and elsewhere after the famous May 17 coup did so not just because of Captain Sankara and his comrades but as part of a process to which they are very committed — a process aimed at the liberation of the Voltaic people so that they can take charge of their own development and destiny. They fought because they did not accept the blows struck against them. They fought because the Voltaic people's interests were betrayed — a betrayal that they also could not accept.

Thus, if an act of revenge took place, it was the revenge of the people against reactionary forces organized around a few men, a few individuals. It was not the revenge of one group against another.

*Question:* Mr. President, is the National Council of the Revolution (CNR) a continuation of the pre-May 17 Council for the Salva-

tion of the People (CSP)?

*Sankara:* We would say yes, that the CNR is a continuation of the pre-May 17 CSP. But it also goes beyond that. The pre-May 17 CSP allowed us to link up with the Voltaic people. It enabled us to help the people express themselves and communicate to us their most sincere and deepest aspirations. It allowed us to become familiar with these aspirations and formulate policies in line with them — the policies of the CSP at that time. These policies were to lead the people toward progressively taking power — toward genuinely assuming power in their own interests.

As you know, the pre-May 17 CSP ended precisely with the events of May 17 — that is, someone, somewhere, betrayed the people, and that betrayal took place on May 17.

*Question:* Mr. President, in a meeting you had with journalists from *Carrefour africain* when you were prime minister, you said that the CSP was seeking a strategy that would put a stop to military coups in Upper Volta. Now that the destiny of the Voltaic people is in your hands, do you think it is possible for the establishment of the CNR to be the last military intervention into the political affairs of the Voltaic state?

*Sankara:* We certainly hope so, and we are convinced that the best way to limit the usurpation of power by a group of individuals, military or civilian, is above all to put responsibility in the hands of the people. Coups can be carried out among factions and cliques, but no lasting coup can be carried out against the people. The best way to avoid the army seizing power for itself is thus to involve the Voltaic people in exercising power as of now. This is our aim.

*Question:* Mr. President, when the CSP came to power on November 7, 1982, many political observers said you were behind it. If this was true, why did you not assume the political leadership of the CSP, thus making it possible to avoid the events of May 17?

*Sankara:* It is a shame that there are political observers who look at political problems as they would a comic strip — they must have their Zorro, their hero.

No, the problem in Upper Volta is much more serious than that. It is a grave error to seek a man, a star — even going so far as to create one, such as saying that Captain Sankara created the CSP and was the brain behind it.

Let me tell you that November 7 has a complex history, full of details. November 7 gave birth to an extremely heterogeneous re-

gime with many components and inevitable contradictions. My comrades and I made every possible effort to prevent the coup from going ahead on November 7. Curiously, we were only in Ouagadougou by coincidence. And curiously, we had done everything in our power to convince those who had an interest in the coup to abandon their project.

But you must understand that not everyone views political problems the same way. For some, if you have arms and a few units of the army with you, that is sufficient to take power. But others have different convictions. Power must be conquered above all by a conscious people. The question of arms is merely complementary to this, necessary at given moments and under specific circumstances.

This is why it is good for you to know that in carrying out the November 7 coup, some well-concealed players tried to involve others in their project, or at least to achieve their ambitions by using and exploiting others.

These people wanted to install someone — let me name names — they wanted to put Colonel Somé Yoryan in as president of Upper Volta. They also wanted to free certain elements of the Third Republic imprisoned by the Military Committee for the Enhancement of National Progress (CMRPN).<sup>1</sup>

To succeed in this project and attain their goal they needed military backing. The best way for them to obtain this, since they felt — and indeed were — isolated within the army, was to float the proposition throughout the units of the army that all those who wished to liberate the detained officers — Capt. Blaise Compaoré, Capt. Henri Zongo, Captain Sankara, and others, such as Colonel Lingani, who was in danger — should participate in their coup.<sup>2</sup>

This approach paid off since many military men felt a moral obligation toward these officers. They gave their support and agreed to fight, unaware that the officers — all those I have named — were themselves against the coup and had said so to officers such as Captain Kambouélé and Comdr. Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo, just to name a few. They had explained to these officers the risks and dangers involved in such a coup.

But not everyone sees politics in the same way. Though we spent hours — entire nights — in discussions with these officers in an attempt to convince them, they acted on their plan and the November 7 coup took place. Of course, given the contradictions that arose among them, they were unable to install Colonel Somé Yoryan as head of state. Though certain people were happy to see some elements of the Third Republic freed from prison, there were those who

were disappointed to see other Third Republic elements freed. You must understand these contradictions too.

Of course, they did not hesitate to name Captain Sankara as the strongman and place responsibility for the coup on him, saying to themselves that the bed had been made, so Sankara would have no choice but to lie in it.

I know that the media repeated this information, thus condemning us to accept political responsibilities that we had rejected for political reasons and yet that we were beginning to be forced to accept for strictly political reasons. As you can understand, a regime born in this way could not last very long.

You should know, too, that we always tried — perhaps out of sentimentality, maybe because we were naive, or perhaps simply out of honesty — to win these putschists to a better understanding of things. We did this despite all the contradictions, differences, and opposing views that existed between us, and even though we had greater strength than this putschist clique, both on a military level and on the level of democratic debate with them. Naturally, we also tried to spare them from any violent encounters.

You know that Comdr. Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo was protected and guarded by commandos trained by us. These commandos maintained all the loyalty and fidelity toward us that elite troops are capable of forging between themselves and their officers. At any moment, we could have carried out a coup against him had we wanted to. We even took risks to prevent coups from being carried out against him.

So you can understand that the November 7 coup was a hard blow against us — an extremely hard blow. At a certain point we submitted our resignation to President Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo. He remembers this. He never made it public, but we gave him our resignation because, as we said at the time, we disagreed with his policies. We knew that he was still receiving orders from somewhere. We also knew that we could not win him to our positions, but we did not want to carry out a coup against him. Instead, we preferred to simply and honestly resign. He never accepted our resignation.

So this is one set of factors involved in the events of November 7. Let us say that there are still mysteries to be uncovered. Maybe history will be able to speak at greater length on this and situate responsibility for the coup more clearly.

*Question:* Mr. President, coming back to one of your earlier answers, can you set a date at this point when the army will return to the

barracks? And can you also tell us what kind of relations you wish to establish with the political forces that exist in the country and, more generally, what you will do to preserve freedom of speech to which you have been, I believe, very much attached in the past?

*Sankara:* On your first question, concerning the return of the army to the barracks. You favor this. You have every right to do so. But please understand that for us there are not revolutionaries in the barracks and those outside the barracks. Rather, there are revolutionaries everywhere. The army is a component of the Voltaic people. As such it is subject to the same contradictions as other layers of the population. We brought the power out of the barracks.

You will have noticed that we are the first military regime that did not establish its headquarters in a military garrison. This is very significant — even more so since we have set ourselves up in the seat of the Entente Council.<sup>3</sup> You understand the significance of this.

For us, it is not a question of the military taking power one day and giving it up the next. Military personnel must live and suffer with the Voltaic people and fight side by side with them at all times. So there is no deadline we are trying to meet. You are no doubt thinking of the assertion that military personnel should no longer be involved in politics. People in certain milieus in our country were enamored of this idea because for them *certain* military men should no longer be involved in politics. That's what they really meant. The proof is that it was military men in power who said this. For them, *certain* military men should no longer be involved in politics, so they placed them under house arrest.

With regard to political forces — what kind of relations would you like us to establish? We have met face to face and discussed directly with the leaders — that is with the former leaders — of the former political parties, because as far as we are concerned these parties no longer exist, they have been dissolved.

The matter is quite clear. The relations we have with them are simply the same relations we have with other citizens of Upper Volta, or, if they wish to become revolutionaries also, the same relations as those that exist among revolutionaries. The only relations that can exist today are those among revolutionaries, and those with counter-revolutionaries.

You raised the question of freedom of speech, to which I "was very attached." I would say that I am very consistent, even if I sometimes change hats. I am quite consistent and am still attached to freedom of speech. I simply state that citizens of Upper Volta will never cease to be free to defend liberty, justice, and democracy.

This is all we will allow.

All those who wish to become involved in this struggle will find a place in our press, in our media, in the columns of our paper, and even in the streets if they wish to defend liberty, freedom of expression, democracy, and justice. Outside the framework of such a struggle, there remains only a struggle by reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries whom we will confront.

## Notes

1. Imprisoned elements of the Third Republic refers to members of the government of President Sangoulé Lamizana, overthrown in a 1980 coup by Col. Saye Zerbo's Military Committee for the Enhancement of National Progress.
2. See the chronology, April 12, 1982.
3. The National Council of the Revolution set up its offices in Ouagadougou in four villas originally constructed in the 1960s for the use of visiting heads of state from members of the Entente Council, a regional trade, investment, and economic development body.