

The People's Revolutionary Courts

January 3, 1984

On January 3, 1984, Sankara delivered the opening speech at the first session of the People's Revolutionary Courts, held at the House of the People in Ouagadougou. The proceedings were broadcast live on national radio. On trial was former President Sangoulé Lamizana, overthrown in a 1980 military coup, who was accused of misappropriating public funds. Lamizana was eventually found not guilty. The following is translated from a pamphlet published by the Ministry of Justice.

Comrades, presidents of institutions;

Comrades, members of the National Council of the Revolution;

Comrades, members of the revolutionary government;

Comrades, members of the People's Revolutionary Courts;

Comrades, cadres of the democratic and popular revolution;

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

It was exactly eighteen years ago to the day that the Voltaic people took to the streets in a revolutionary tide, shouting slogans such as "Down with the embezzlers of public funds!" and "Down with those who starve the people!" at those who had perpetually gagged, exploited, and oppressed them. Eighteen years ago today the Voltaic people took to the streets to demand "bread, water, and democracy."

On January 3, 1966, the Voltaic people surged forward as one to place the reactionary and corrupt bourgeoisie of our country on trial — a bourgeoisie that, after using the people as a springboard to attain power, turned its backs on them in an unbridled race to accumulate ill-gotten wealth.

Today, the Voltaic people again accuse and demand that the people's verdict be imposed. Today, the Voltaic people have forged an appropriate instrument, the People's Revolutionary Courts, capable of achieving their most profound and long-standing aspirations. We have made our choice. From this moment on, nothing can prevent

the people from rendering their verdict. From this moment on, nothing will be able to prevent the people from meting out exemplary punishment to all the political scum who have fed off the famine and the villains who have treated the people with contempt and humiliated them with a thousand and one indignities.

The Voltaic people accuse and the world trembles.

The world of the exploiters, pillagers, and all those who have profited from the neocolonial system is trembling because the Voltaic people have now become masters of their destiny and will have justice.

Comrades, members of the People's Revolutionary Courts, in choosing January 3 as the date for the solemn opening of your deliberations, you are simply reestablishing the link with a recent past, with a decisive moment in the development of the people's conscious opposition to domination and exploitation by reactionary social layers, classes, and by real supporters of imperialism here at home.

The justification for setting up the People's Revolutionary Courts lies in the fact that the Voltaic people intend to replace the traditional courts and put into practice the principle of genuine participation by the toiling and exploited classes in the administration and management of state affairs in all spheres and sectors of society.

The judges of the People's Revolutionary Courts have been chosen from among the toilers and from among them only. Their mission is to apply the will of the people. For this, they have no need to know the old laws. Since they come from among the people, it is sufficient for them to let themselves be guided by their feel for popular justice.

In the absence of codified texts, they should base themselves on revolutionary law, rejecting the laws of neocolonial society. In establishing as its goal the destruction of the bureaucratic state apparatus, and in making it much easier for the people to find representation, our revolution, the August revolution, proves — if proof were still necessary — that the regime established by it is more democratic than the most democratic of bourgeois republics.

Despite this, we should expect that the establishment of our People's Revolutionary Courts will be the object of attack by enemies inside and outside the country, who, without a shadow of a doubt, will see in them an instrument of repression and political inquisition.

No doubt these people will shout about contempt for the rights of man. But this will not hold up. Our popular justice is a justice distinct from that of a society where the exploiters and oppressors control the state apparatus, in that it will publicly bring to light and expose the entire hidden social and political side of the crimes perpetrated

against the people, helping them to understand the consequences of these crimes, so that lessons can be drawn with regard to social morality and political practice. The judgments of the People's Revolutionary Courts will allow us to lay bare the sores of the neocolonial regime for all the world to see, providing material for criticism and laying out the elements of the construction of a new society.

In addition, by condemning social, economic, and moral infamies, we conduct a political trial, putting into question the political system of neocolonial society. Through the individual, society as a whole comes into question. This is why the discussion throughout the course of the trial should take on an educational character in its explanations given to those observing and in the press. Verdicts rendered should give us plenty to think about. Reactionary bourgeois morality hypocritically goes into fits of indignation over the condemnation of a few individuals, while remaining silent in its complicity with the wholesale genocide of a people dying of impoverishment, starvation, and obscurantism. We judge one man in order to establish the rights of millions. Thus, we are fervent defenders of the rights of man and not the rights of one man. To the immoral "morality" of the exploiting and corrupt minority, we counterpose the revolutionary morality of an entire people in favor of social justice.

Confident of this revolutionary legitimacy, the National Council of the Revolution (CNR) urges you, comrade judges of the People's Revolutionary Courts, to demonstrate coolheadedness and revolutionary consciousness; to act without excess, but firmly; with clarity of thought and not emotion; and with sound judgment but not leniency, so as to safeguard the gains of our revolution.

We have chosen between two forms of law: the revolutionary law of the people on the one hand, and the former reactionary law of the bourgeois minority on the other. The justice you are called upon to render is inspired by the democratic principles of our revolution. Democracy for the people and against those who exploit and oppress — such is the foundation for the work of the People's Revolutionary Courts.

You should be proud — proud to have been chosen and called on to be the architects of an undertaking that is innovative from all points of view.

Let us leave those who subscribe to so-called pure democracy to their whining and procrastination. Let the jurists and other scholars — formalists obsessed by procedures and protocol — be indignant and scandalized. They have not even understood that all this is aimed at bamboozling the people, turning the magistrate, draped in his

robe, decked out in his cloak, and often even a wig, into a clown for whom revolutionaries feel compassion, especially when we feel him drawing close to the people to the point of wanting to abandon his profession.

Reactionary regimes dispense reactionary justice. We understand the distress of a progressive or revolutionary magistrate when forced to apply laws that make a mockery of his innermost political convictions. We have observed the same dilemma in other professions — in the army, to cite just one example. But fortunately the revolution of August 4, the democratic and popular revolution, has liberated and set in motion the awareness of all those who have consciously chosen to side with the people.

The people of Upper Volta ceased being the dupes of reactionary politicians the day they understood that in a society where exploiters impose their domination on the majority of the people, justice unquestionably means justice for the exploiters. Since our revolution has as one of its objectives the institution of a democratic state, such a state must be fundamentally different from that of a state of exploiters.

Justice in a democratic state must therefore also be different from the justice of the exploiters. If the reactionary political regimes buried here, and those like them fossilizing elsewhere, never dared to put political mobsterism on trial and dare not do so today, it is precisely because they have understood the impossibility under their reactionary system of instituting a People's Revolutionary Court and allowing the people to speak out without themselves being swept aside. In the same way, they could not even do so with the traditional courts, whose verdicts could only provoke the legitimate wrath of the voiceless, the voice of the people.

This was the reason for the permanently awkward aspect of the administrative detentions, for example, carried out by the philistines of the Military Committee for the Enhancement of National Progress under the learned tutelage of the reactionary inventor-historian-inquisitionist, Joseph Ki-Zerbo.

Elsewhere, we see life imprisonment and permanent house arrest, all counting on the passage of time to make us forget that the leaders are faced with a political problem that they must solve: the people and their right to justice.

In setting up the People's Revolutionary Courts, the CNR, the revolutionary government, and the fighting people of the democratic and popular revolution know that popular justice must be ruthless and rigorous with regard to corrupt elements that are uncovered even

in our very ranks. At the same time, every cadre knows that his political work, his daily conduct, and his social activity will be so visible that he cannot allow himself to do by night — or in the shadows — anything different from what he can do in broad daylight with a clear conscience. In reality, there is no virtue other than the virtue imposed by, and genuinely under the control of, society and the people.

In a society such as ours, where the population is 95 percent illiterate and maintained in obscurantism and ignorance by the ruling classes, bourgeois law, in defiance of all common sense, dares to assert that “ignorance of the law is no excuse.” Such are the devices used by the idle ruling classes to oppress the broad popular masses, both the peasants of our countryside and the workers of our towns.

Likewise, in the name of this same law, it is asserted that “the law alone may employ force” — the law having been decreed in order to defend and safeguard the interests of the dominant classes. This argument concerning force was dredged up every time the interests of the minority were threatened. “The law alone may employ force” was hallowed by the expropriators in order to rule out any idea of popular justice.

Thus, anything is permissible, except for those without the money to buy the services of lawyers or magistrates when they and they alone are responsible for interpreting in their esoteric and elitist language consciously confused texts.

Ultimately, and for all intents and purposes, the law does employ force. The law of the richest, of the highest bidder, the oratorical talent sold to the highest bidder, always overrides the rights of the people, who remain ever guilty of being poor, of being unable to buy the services of renowned lawyers, or who are simply ignorant and illiterate.

Every day, under our very noses, we see thieves pursued by a crowd taking refuge in a police station, convinced that “the law alone may employ force,” and that they will be assured of protection. By contrast, however, a peasant passing through Ouagadougou, facing charges for the least trifle, must give the slip to both the prosecutor and police chief, since there is no hope of justice for him anywhere in the world of the big city. He believes the police station to be a place where he will be punished in the name of the law. He also believes — naively — that all citizens are equal before this immutable and uncircumventable law.

The democratic and popular revolution owes it to itself to demolish this antidemocratic and antipopular justice — just as our people demolished the results of the rigged elections of December 1965,

by which the reactionary megalomaniac Maurice Yaméogo claimed to have "democratically" won 99.99 percent of the votes. A few days later, on January 3, 1966, our people imposed its own implacable, revolutionary verdict outside the framework of the ballot box and in opposition to the ballots, deposing the impostor. No interpreter of Roman texts, no magistrate or lawyer, no court dared to put itself in the way of this powerful and implacable democracy — a truly popular democracy. And for good reason!

More recently, after the counterrevolutionary coup of May 17, 1983, when Comrade Blaise Compaoré returned to his troops and the revolutionary people of Pô in order to prepare the revolutionary counterattack against the usurpers, no one dared challenge the legitimacy of this attitude. It was clear that this challenged the military regulations, codes, and laws of the neocolonial army. Comrade Compaoré knew that his commandos and the people of Pô truly personified the most profound feelings of justice, honor, and dignity of our entire people. From this point of view, his action was democratic and legal a thousand times over. No military code or law of Voltaic neocolonial justice could approve such an attitude. Yet it was just and legitimate in the eyes of the vast majority of our revolutionary people, who had been held in contempt and humiliated by the reactionary betrayal of May 17, 1983. The manner in which our people have demonstrated their feelings in these two examples shows us that it serves no purpose to conform to the bourgeois legality of the minority if we are not in total harmony with the uncodified morality of our people.

The Voltaic people offer to share their experience with other peoples of the world. No arsenal of juridico-political combinations, no corrupt, feudal financial wizard, no guilt-tripping, and no electoralist circus will be able to prevent the justice of the people from triumphing.

Comrades, as long as oppression and exploitation exist, there will always be two justices and two democracies: that of the oppressors and that of the oppressed; that of the exploiters and that of the exploited. Justice under the democratic and popular revolution will always be justice for the oppressed and exploited against the neocolonial justice of yesterday, which was justice for the oppressors and exploiters. Comrades, the people must carry out justice themselves — their own justice.

The endless lamentations and crocodile tears must not influence us in any way when we are required to deal some hard blows against those who show they are incapable of any feelings other than the

most feudalistic contempt for the masses and their interests. However, if there are some who, having been punished severely and given the opportunity to understand their crimes, convince you of their gratitude toward the people, then hold out to them a saving hand.

Let them learn to know us. After having made them pay every last penny legitimately demanded from them by the people, we will create the conditions for them to understand that — stripped of their immense ill-gotten wealth — they will be able to find true happiness. In our revolutionary society, such happiness can be nothing other than honest labor for honest gain. This honest gain brings with it a dignity and freedom that cannot be calculated in terms of secret bank accounts in Switzerland or elsewhere, nor in terms of speculative stocks on the most respectable exchanges, nor in parading an assertive and traumatizing luxury before a people dying of hunger, disease, and ignorance. This happiness to which we invite those who may repent will reside in the satisfaction of having proven their usefulness to society and of participating in defining and realizing the aspirations of the people, who accept and integrate them.

Comrades, the People's Revolutionary Courts are sounding the death knell of Roman law; they are playing the swan song of the alien Napoleonic social law that has marginalized so very many of our people while declaring sacred the illegitimate and unjust privileges of a minority class. May the sessions soon to follow in Ouagadougou trace a radiant path at whose end, in the heavens of the world revolution, will shine the great sun of justice, whose powerful rays will bathe the hearts of all those who hope, but who do not dare; of those who dare, but who do not understand; and of all those who understand, but who do not dare.

Homeland or death, we will triumph!