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THOMAS SANKARA

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Thomas Sankara

president of Burkina Faso



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BY [Carina Ray](#) [View](#) [Edit History](#)**Born:** December 21, 1949 • [Burkina Faso](#)**Died:** October 15, 1987 (aged 37) • [Ouagadougou](#) • [Burkina Faso](#)**Title / Office:** [president \(1983-1987\)](#), [Burkina Faso](#) • [prime minister \(1983-1983\)](#), [Burkina Faso](#)

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Thomas Sankara, (born December 21, 1949, Yako, Upper Volta [now Burkina Faso]—died October 15, 1987, [Ouagadougou](#), Burkina Faso), military officer and proponent of [Pan-Africanism](#) who was installed as [president](#) of Upper Volta (later [Burkina Faso](#)) in 1983 after a military [coup](#). He held that position until 1987, when he was killed during another coup.

Sankara's [Roman Catholic](#) parents wanted him to be a [priest](#), but he opted for a military career instead. In 1970, at the age of 20, Sankara was sent for officer training in [Madagascar](#), where he witnessed a popular uprising of students and workers that succeeded in toppling Madagascar's government. Before returning to Upper Volta in 1972, Sankara attended a [parachute](#) academy in [France](#), where he was further exposed to left-wing political [ideologies](#). In 1974 he earned much public attention for his heroic performance in the border war with [Mali](#). but vears later he would renounce the w

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By the early 1980s, Burkina Faso was being rocked by a series of [labour union strikes](#) and military coups. Sankara's military achievements and [charismatic](#) leadership style made him a popular choice for political appointments, but his personal and political [integrity](#) put him at odds with the leadership of the successive military governments that came to power, leading to his arrest on several occasions. In January 1983, Sankara was selected as the [prime minister](#) of the newly formed Council for the Salvation of the People (Conseil de Salut du Peuple; CSP), headed by [Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo](#). This post provided him with an entryway into international politics and a chance to meet with leaders of the nonaligned movement, including [Fidel Castro \(Cuba\)](#), [Samora Machel \(Mozambique\)](#), and Maurice Bishop ([Grenada](#)). Sankara's anti-imperialist stance and grassroots popularity increasingly put him at odds with [conservative](#) elements within the CSP, including President Ouédraogo. Sankara was removed as prime minister in May and arrested once again. On [August 4, 1983](#), [Blaise Compaoré](#), Sankara's close friend and fellow army colleague, led a group that freed Sankara, overthrew the Ouédraogo regime, and formed the National Council of the Revolution (Conseil National de la Révolution) with Sankara as its president.

Sankara declared the objectives of the “democratic and popular revolution” to be primarily concerned with the tasks of [eradicating corruption](#), fighting environmental [degradation](#), empowering women, and increasing access to education and health care, with the larger

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posts. On the environmental front, in the first year of his presidency alone 10 million [trees](#) were planted in an effort to combat [desertification](#). On the first anniversary of the coup that had brought him to power, he changed the [country's](#) name from Upper Volta to Burkina Faso, which means roughly “land of upright people” in [Mossi](#) and Dyula, the country's two most widely spoken [indigenous](#) languages.

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Despite the great strides that were made, there was growing dissent in the country, partly because of economic problems and opposition from traditional quarters to some of Sankara's more progressive social policies. His administration gradually lost popular support, and internal conflict within his government grew as well. On October 15, 1987, Sankara was assassinated in a coup led by Compaoré and two others.

Collections of Sankara's speeches, published posthumously, include *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–1987* (1988, reprinted 2001), *Women's Liberation and the African Freedom Struggle*, 2nd ed. (2007), and *We Are Heirs of the World's Revolutions: Speeches from the Burkina Faso Revolution, 1983–87*, 2nd ed. (2007).

Carina Ray

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