

OPINION AND ANALYSIS

The Burkina Faso uprising: the absence of memory among African strong men

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IS THE Burkina Faso uprising a harbinger of the Black Spring in sub-Saharan Africa? Burkinabe former strong man, Blaise Compaore, was forced to flee into exile in Ivory Coast in October 2014 when an attempt to elongate his stay in power was resisted through a popular uprising. The Burkinabe populace could not understand what unfinished business Compaore, who had been in power for almost 30 years, had by insisting on influencing a malleable parliament into amending the constitution to allow him to run for yet another term. Compaore came into power through a bloody coup in 1987 during which his childhood friend and one of Africa's most celebrated sons, Thomas Sankara, was assassinated.

Thomas Sankara seized power too through a coup in 1983 and thereafter embarked on the most ambitious socioeconomic and political blueprint to have ever been pursued in post-colonial Africa. It entailed the fight against corruption and an attempt to empower the Burkinabe people through health, educational and economic reform. This was symbolised through change of the country's name from Upper Volta to Burkina Faso or 'Land of Incorruptible People'. Sankara abhorred ostentation and emphasised probity. He banned fuel-guzzling cars and ensured that modest vehicles served the bureaucracy as part of his efforts at combating profligacy a malaise that has bedevilled post-colonial African governments and retarded development. He was independent minded and regarded Fidel Castro as his hero. This enraged critics within and abroad.

Consequently he was overthrown and assassinated in the 1987 coup that had the backing of Burkina Faso former colonial master, France. With his death, the Burkinabe Dream too, died since Compaore made it his mission to undo what he defined as Sankara's Marxist policies. Since then, until he was forced out of office, Compaore ran Burkina Faso virtually like a fiefdom weathering the tide of multiparty politics.

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The Burkina Faso uprising

Blaise Compaore was Janus faced. He adopted the image of West Africa's preeminent chief mediator and played a prominent role as a peacemaker in Ivory Coast, Guinea and Mali while being accused of fomenting conflict in the region too. His closeness to former Libyan dictator and his financier, Muammar Gaddafi, accused of fanning conflict in Liberia, Sierra Leone and in many other African countries, did not endear him to many. Besides, he remained a staunch ally of the West particularly the French and the US until his ouster because they regarded him as a 'point man' in the war against terrorism in the Sahel region.

The apparent Burkinabe stability held despite of but not because of Compaore. He did not believe in democracy having won four disputed elections in 1991, 1998, 2005 and 2010. His intention to extend his tenure beyond 27 years clearly exposed him as a ruler out of tune with the current political thinking in much of Africa where greater demand for accountability by the people is increasingly gaining traction.

The changing of term limits threatens to be the next battleground across Africa since the quest for multiparty politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Africa's strong men realised that they can easily serve two terms once elected by exploiting their incumbency and so the urge to tweak the constitution to stay in power indefinitely is increasingly becoming irresistible. Ten or even 14 years is apparently too short a period of time to implement an African strong man's 'vision'. But if a president cannot make a positive impact in the lives of people within 10 or 14 years, it would not be an exaggeration to deduce that even if he rules for 50 years, he will achieve nothing other than ruining the state through endemic corruption, polarisation of the society and suppression of the basic liberties.

Compaore's political behaviour was not an aberration. Currently there are other African rulers toying with the idea of tinkering with their respective countries' constitutions to stay in power beyond the mandated two terms. Rulers in Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Republic of Congo are said to be considering removal of term limits to ensure that they either go for another term or rule in perpetuity. These countries are fragile states ruptured by internecine conflict and so could easily relapse into civil war in case their rulers insist on standing again. Joseph Kabila, Paul Kagame, Pierre Nkurunziza and Denis Sassou Nguesso respectively need to come out strongly and refute allegations that they are considering extending their stay in power.

Compaore's toppling must serve as a warning to other African rulers such as Yoweri Museveni, Paul Biya, Obiang Nguema, Eduardo Dos Santos, Robert Mugabe and Omar Bashir who have been in power for decades. At the beginning of the Burkina Faso uprising, youth took down Compaore's statue erected next to Muammar Gaddafi's in the second largest city, Bobo Dioulasso. The symbolism of this action escaped the strong man. The lesson is that when a people rise up in protest against tyranny, no amount of firepower can stop them. There will never be enough prisons to lock away everyone. The continued stay of these rulers in office is jeopardising stability, thus denying the continent the requisite atmosphere for economic growth and development. Massive poverty and inequalities in these countries have the potential to breed warlords and militias as political gladiators compete for power for illicit accumulation of wealth.

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