

Burkina Faso: Revolution, authoritarianism and the crisis of African emancipation politics

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There was a time when Robert Mugabe stood as the towering figure of African liberation. Raised fists, Pan-Africanist banners, and chants of self-rule marked Zimbabwe's emergence from white settler colonialism. Mugabe, like many of his generation, represented the victory of the oppressed against imperial domination. But history, with its ruthless clarity, would later mark him not only as a liberator but as an authoritarian. His early heroism curdled into repression, corruption, and the suffocation of dissent.

This trajectory is not unique to Mugabe, nor to Zimbabwe. Across the African continent, a grim pattern repeats itself: liberation movements, once anchored in popular struggle and dreams of self-determination, morph into bureaucratic, militarised and often repressive regimes.

Today, a new face of revolution is emerging in Burkina Faso under the youthful and charismatic Captain Ibrahim Traoré. His image is cast in the mould of Thomas Sankara, evoking the anti-imperialist spirit of the 1980s, and his language is resolute: "This is not a democracy. This is a revolution."

But what kind of revolution dismisses democracy? What are we to make of yet another seizure of power by men in uniform, claiming to act on behalf of the people? If history is to be our teacher, then we must ask: can a revolution built on authoritarian foundations ever birth true liberation? Or are we merely witnessing the replay of a tragic cycle in which the people are always betrayed?

In answering this, anarchist theory offers a sobering and necessary critique, particularly the principle of "prefiguration". Loosely this means what we want our society to become in the future is literally shaped by what we do today. Therefore the means to transform society and used to achieve liberation must reflect the liberated society we seek to build. Dictatorship in the name of the people is not a contradiction; it is a betrayal.

Africa's liberation paradox

In 1980, Mugabe took the reins of an independent Zimbabwe amid jubilation. A fierce critic of apartheid South Africa and a stalwart of African nationalism, Mugabe embodied the hopes of a continent still shaking off colonial chains. His government expanded access to education and health, undertook land redistribution (albeit slowly at first), and positioned Zimbabwe as a regional beacon.

Yet beneath the surface of national pride lurked the seeds of authoritarian rule. The Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland state-directed violence that left thousands dead was the first major crack in the façade. By the 1990s and 2000s, the promise had largely faded. Economic mismanagement, systematic attacks on the opposition, the use of war veterans as enforcers and rigged elections turned Zimbabwe into a cautionary tale. Mugabe had become the very figure he once fought against: a ruler deaf to the cries of his people.

What went wrong? The problem was not merely Mugabe's personality or age, but a structural one: a centralised, hierarchical, militarised politics that concentrated power in the hands of a few. The masses, once mobilised for liberation, were now reduced to spectators of state-led nationalism. The logic of domination, inherited from colonial rule, remained intact.

The African continent is filled with liberation leaders who later ossified into authoritarian rulers. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Laurent-Désiré Kabila rose to power after deposing the infamous Mobutu Sese Seko. Hailed as a reformer, he quickly silenced dissent, suspended democratic institutions, and entrenched cronyism.

In Eritrea, Isaias Afwerki's led the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) to independence from Ethiopia in 1993, since then the government has abolished elections, outlawed dissent, and turned the country into a prison state. In Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, once a progressive voice with an ambitious reform agenda who came into power in 1986 after a guerrilla war, promising to end dictatorship and restore democracy has clung to power for decades, repressing opposition and manipulating constitutional term limits.

What binds these cases is not simply the betrayal of early ideals but the structure of the revolutionary movements themselves: the dominance of military actors, the centralisation of decision-making and the erasure of grassroots democratic input. Liberation became a state project, not a people's movement. The result was not freedom but domination by a different set of elites.

Ibrahim Traoré and the Burkina Faso moment

It is in this historical context that we must understand the rise of Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso. In September 2022, Traoré seized power from a fellow military officer, citing the government's failure to contain jihadist violence and its lingering ties to French neocolonial interests. Young, fiery and armed with Pan-African rhetoric, Traoré has been embraced by many across Africa as a new kind of revolutionary. His speeches decry imperialism, his posture rejects Western control and his persona taps into the Sankarist legacy.

Yet, there are reasons to be deeply cautious. Traoré has suspended the Constitution, dissolved the National Assembly and postponed elections indefinitely. Civil society participation is tightly controlled. Criticism is increasingly silenced under the banner of national unity. Most tellingly, Traoré himself has declared that this is not a democracy but a revolution.

Here lies the central contradiction. A revolution that excludes participatory, horizontal and people-driven democracy is not a revolution of liberation, but of substitution. The people are once again sidelined, replaced by uniforms and commands.

The alternative: Prefiguration and the case of Nestor Makhno

So one must then wonder whether a democratic revolution is even possible and, if yes, can we point to an example? The example must not only be historically true but must also reject the logic of the "ends justify the means" that has plagued so many revolutionary movements.

The example must embody the concept of prefiguration, by developing the type of ideas and social structures today that mirror the tomorrow we want. There existed a man by the name of Nestor Makhno who led the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine during the early 20th century. Operating during the Russian Civil War, Makhno led a peasant-based movement that resisted both the White counter-revolution and the authoritarian Bolsheviks. Central to the Makhnovist approach was the creation of workers' and peasants' councils, assemblies where decisions were made collectively and leaders were subject to immediate recall. The army itself functioned democratically, with elected commanders and decisions made in open discussion.

Makhno's movement was not perfect, but it represented a rare experiment in what a truly self-managed, bottom-up revolution could look like. Its core lesson was that real freedom is impossible without democratic participation at every level of struggle. Militarised command struc-

tures cannot give birth to emancipatory societies; instead they reproduce the hierarchies they claim to oppose.

If Africa's revolutions are to avoid the fate of betrayal, they must reject the authoritarian path. This means dismantling the idea that a small revolutionary elite or a military junta can deliver freedom on behalf of the people. The people must deliver it themselves.

This requires building structures of direct democracy, participatory budgeting, local councils, community assemblies, federations of self-organised movements. It means breaking from both Western liberal democracy, with its elite-controlled institutions, and from nationalist authoritarianism, with its strongmen and military decrees.

It means recognising that a revolution that begins by silencing voices will end by crushing them. In Burkina Faso, the revolutionary moment is still young. There is still time to reshape its path toward radical democracy rather than dictatorship with a populist face. But that will require more than speeches; it will require giving the people power not just in rhetoric, but in practice.

History has been a graveyard of failed liberations. But it doesn't have to be. If we take seriously the anarchist principle that the means must reflect the ends, we can begin to imagine a politics that does not reproduce hierarchy but dismantles it. A politics that is not merely anti-imperialist, but anti-authoritarian. A revolution that is not a replacement of rulers, but the abolition of rule itself.

This article in no way is against the anti-imperialist/anti-colonialist stance of Burkina Faso nor is it a personal critique of the Capitan, rather it argues for all progressive forces to truly self-reflect on the type of liberation we want on the continent. Liberation cannot be delivered from above. It must be built from below, and it must begin now.

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