The Return of Pan-Africanism: Traoré's Burkina Faso

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Since seizing power in September 2022, Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traoré has increasingly presented his government as part of a wider struggle for African political and economic sovereignty. The comparison with former President Thomas Sankara, who governed from 1983 to 1987, has therefore become almost inevitable. Both leaders have advocated resource sovereignty, domestic production, reduced foreign dependence and African cooperation. Yet Traoré governs a very different Burkina Faso, marked by an Islamist insurgency, a multipolar geopolitical environment and growing criticism over political repression. The question is not simply whether Traoré resembles Sankara, but whether his policies represent a new form of Pan-African politics adapted to the contemporary Sahel.

Sovereignty Begins with Resources

For Sankara, political independence meant little without economic control; his government encouraged domestic agriculture and local consumption as a means of reducing reliance on imported goods and foreign finance. Likewise, Traoré has applied this logic, most clearly in the case of gold.

Burkina Faso is a major African gold producer, but much of its industrial mining sector has historically been operated by foreign companies. In 2024, a new Mining Code raised the state's free carried interest in mining projects from 10 to 15 per cent and increased royalties when gold prices are high (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2025). In 2025, the government also expanded the role of the state-owned Société de Participation Minière du Burkina Faso (SOPAMIB), transferring several mining assets to SOPAMIB and signalling further nationalisations (Reuters, 2025a). Prime Minister Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo summarised the rationale: "We should see more of the benefits of mining in Burkina Faso, not just the consequences that the population suffers" (Reuters, 2025a).

In that interview, Ouédraogo also pointed out the increasing role of the state in purchasing and collecting artisanal gold. He said that the National Company for Precious Substances had collected more than eight tonnes of gold in 2024 and over eleven tonnes in the first quarter of 2025, and that the government had also, for the first time, started to set up a national gold reserve. The aim of these measures is to ensure that a larger portion of Burkina Faso's mineral wealth remains in the national economy. As Ouédraogo put it, "Aujourd'hui, tout est mis en œuvre pour que l'or du Burkina Faso profite au Burkina Faso" (Today, every effort is being made to ensure that Burkina Faso's gold benefits Burkina Faso itself).

This echoes Sankara's view that natural resources should promote national development rather than generate profits abroad. Yet merely exercising control over extraction is only the first step; the more difficult challenge is to create value within Burkina Faso.

From Exporting Cotton to Producing Clothes

In recent months, the second aim has become more apparent. On 9 September 2026, Traoré opened TEXFORCES-BF, a textile complex situated near Bobo-Dioulasso, which is designed to convert Burkinabè cotton into military uniforms and civil garments. The government presented the project as "industrial sovereignty", aiming to reduce imports while retaining employment and added value domestically (Government of Burkina Faso, 2026).

In the past, Burkina Faso has exported raw cotton and has imported finished textiles, with the result that the more profitable stages of production have remained overseas. The parallel with Sankara is particularly direct. In his 1987 Addis Ababa speech, he called on African countries to "produce in Africa, process in Africa, consume in Africa" and urged them to "let us

produce what we need and consume what we produce, instead of importing it" (Sankara, 1987). TEXFORCES-BF therefore echoes not only Sankara's broader rhetoric of self-reliance, but a specific economic principle: keeping a greater share of production, processing and value creation within Africa.

The current emphasis on local processing shows that Sankara backed the use of goods produced at home. The World Bank states that the economy expanded by 5.3% in 2025, with agriculture and mining being among the factors responsible for this growth (World Bank, 2026). Even though this growth does not clearly demonstrate that Traoré has set up a successful new economic model (particularly given the persistently high gold prices and continuing insecurity), it does point to a tendency towards extracting greater value from the country's own resources.

Breaking with France

Economic sovereignty has been accompanied by a political break with France. After independence in 1960, Burkina Faso remained embedded in the wider network of political, military and economic relationships known as Françafrique. Critics have described aspects of this system as neocolonial because France retained privileged influence after formal decolonisation, although domestic actors also exercised considerable agency.

French troops left Burkina Faso in 2023, and relations deteriorated further, culminating in Ouagadougou's formal severance of diplomatic ties with Paris on 26 June 2026 (Reuters, 2026a). Communications Minister Gilbert Ouedraogo said that the conditions for relations based on 'mutual respect', 'non-interference' and 'national sovereignty' are no longer present. He also accused France of supporting "subversive networks" and "terrorists"; France has previously denied accusations that it supports terrorism in the Sahel (Reuters, 2026a).

For Traoré, the rupture reflects a wider political argument that African states should decide on their security arrangements and economic policies without granting their former colonial power a privileged influence. This is once again something associated with Sankara. However, the geopolitical situation is different in that the decline of French influence has opened space for Russia, China and other partners, thus raising the issue of whether diversification will lead to real autonomy or merely to new types of dependence.

Pan-Africanism Through the Sahel

Traoré's Pan-African politics are not limited to Burkina Faso. The governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have increasingly coordinated security and foreign policy through the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), and their withdrawal from ECOWAS formally took effect in January 2025 (Reuters, 2025b). Sovereignty is therefore presented not only as nationalism

but as something that can be strengthened through cooperation between African states.

This has a clear parallel with Sankara's Pan-Africanism. In his 1987 address to the Organisation of African Unity, Sankara asked: "Are we going to continue letting heads of state seek individual solutions to the debt problem?" He also described foreign debt as "a carefully orchestrated reconquest of Africa" (Sankara, 1987). His argument was that African states were too vulnerable when negotiating separately and should respond collectively.

Traoré similarly treats regional solidarity as a means of asserting sovereignty. The difference lies in the area of emphasis: Sankara placed a strong focus on economic transformation and on continental political solidarity, whereas the AES has so far mainly been influenced by security cooperation and by their shared resistance to external political pressure.

The Limits of Sovereignty

Traoré's understanding of sovereignty also extends to international institutions. In 2026, Burkina Faso closed the UN Human Rights Office in the country. Foreign Minister Karamoko Jean Marie Traoré accused international organisations of behaving like "super police" and overstepping the country's sovereignty. The government had previously suspended the office's activities after criticism from UN officials and Human Rights Watch over restrictions on civic space and alleged abuses by state forces (Human Rights Watch, 2026).

From the government's perspective, the situation was again an example of non-interference; human rights organisations, by contrast, argued that the closure had eliminated an important independent method of monitoring abuses. This event reveals a basic contradiction in Traoré's policy, since while the defence of sovereignty can help to strengthen the state against external pressure, it can also result in reduced supervision of state power.

That tension is also evident at home. In January 2026, the government dissolved all the political parties. Burkina Faso had a rather fragmented party system: before the 2022 coup, more than 100 parties had been registered, but only 15 of them secured seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections (Reuters, 2026b). The government claimed that this degree of party proliferation had damaged social cohesion. Rather than reforming electoral rules, Traoré dissolved all political parties, further concentrating political power.

The Security Challenge

The key difference between Sankara's Burkina Faso and that of Traoré is war. Traoré is dealing with an Islamist insurgency that has killed thousands, displaced communities and weakened state control in several areas. The World Health Organization says that approximately two million people will need humanitarian health assistance in 2026, and due to the insecurity,

some health facilities have been forced to close or are now operating at reduced capacity (World Health Organization [WHO], 2026).

This security crisis helps explain both Traoré's political appeal and his search for new military partners. Russia has become increasingly important as French influence has declined. Here lies a major test of Traoré's Pan-Africanism: replacing dependence on France with dependence on another external power would not fulfil Sankara's vision of genuine autonomy.

Traoré is not simply a new Sankara

Traoré and Sankara share genuine similarities: both put sovereignty at the heart of their political discourse, hold that control over resources is as important as formal independence, support greater domestic production, and regard African cooperation as a means of countering external pressure. Traoré's recent nationalisations, together with TEXFORCES-BF, the break with France and his increased integration with Mali and Niger show that he is trying to turn sovereignty from a rhetorical position into actual policy.

The importance of the differences is just as great. While Sankara adopted a more radical stance on debt and the international economic system, Traoré has remained in contact with organisations such as the IMF, which provided further funding in June 2026 (IMF, 2026). Furthermore, Traoré rules under the influence of a serious insurgency and has tightened his political power.

His legacy will therefore go beyond merely opposing France or appealing to Sankara. The true test lies in whether greater control over gold and cotton can lead to industrialisation, employment and an improvement in living standards; whether the AES can achieve genuine African strategic autonomy; and whether Burkina Faso can reduce its foreign dependence without merely swapping one external patron for another. Sankara's lasting idea was that political independence was only important when Africans had the real ability to decide their own future. It will be up to Traoré to turn that principle into sustainable development, security and autonomy, and this will decide whether his project becomes a new phase in Pan-Africanism or stays mainly as a strong political narrative.

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