

Burkina Faso opens trial on 1987 Thomas Sankara assassination

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Captain Thomas Sankara, president of Burkina Faso, gives a press conference in 1986 [Eric Congo/AFP]

Ouagadougou, October 11 (RHC)--The trial of 14 men, including a former president, has begun in Burkina Faso over the assassination of the country's revered revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara 34 years ago.

Former President Blaise Compaore and 13 others face an array of charges in the death of Sankara, described by his followers as the African Che Guevara. The killing of Sankara, an icon of pan-Africanism, has for years cast a dark shadow over the Sahel state.

Sankara and 12 others were riddled with bullets by a hit squad in October 1987 during a putsch that brought his friend and comrade-in-arms Compaore to power.

Compaore ruled the country for the next 27 years before being deposed by a popular uprising and fleeing to neighbouring Ivory Coast, which granted him citizenship. He and his former right-hand man, General Gilbert Diendere, who once headed the elite Presidential Security Regiment, face charges of complicity in murder, harming state security and complicity in the concealment of corpses.

Compaore, who has always rejected allegations that he orchestrated the killing, will be tried in absentia by the military court in the capital, Ouagadougou. Days before the trial opened on Monday, his lawyers announced he would not be attending a “political trial” flawed by irregularities, and insisted he enjoyed immunity as a former head of state.

Diendere, 61, is already serving a 20-year sentence for masterminding a plot in 2015 against the transitional government that followed Compaore’s removal. Another prominent figure among the accused is Hyacinthe Kafando, a former chief warrant officer in Compaore’s presidential guard, who is accused of leading the hit squad. He is on the run.

A young army captain and Marxist-Leninist, Sankara came to power in a coup in 1983. He changed the country’s name from Upper Volta, a legacy of the French colonial era, to Burkina Faso, which means “The land of honest men.”

He pushed ahead with a socialist agenda of nationalisations and banned female genital mutilation, polygamy and forced marriages. Like Ghana’s former leader Jerry Rawlings, he became an idol in left-wing circles in Africa, lauded for his radical policies and defiance of the big powers.

Burkina Faso has long been burdened by silence over the assassination – during Compaore’s long time in office, the subject was taboo – and many are angry that the killers have gone unpunished.

“The trial will mark the end to all the lying – we will get a form of truth. But the trial will not be able to restore our dream,” Halouna Traore, a comrade of Sankara and survivor of the putsch, said in a TV interview.

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