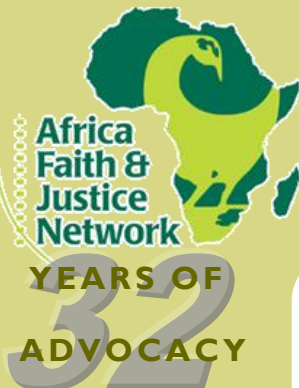


A Nation's Journey from Tyranny to Democracy

The 2014 Popular Revolution in Burkina Faso

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MISSION STATEMENT

The Africa Faith and Justice Network, inspired by the Gospel and informed by Catholic Social Teaching, educates and advocates for just relations with Africa.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Moved to action by their personal experiences in Africa, three Catholic missionary congregations namely the Missionaries of Africa, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritains), and the Society of African Missions, founded the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) in 1983 to transform United States policy towards Africa and her people. Since that time, membership has grown and remains committed in faith to advocate in Washington, DC for U.S. relations with Africa that foster justice and peace, and to educate the public across the United States on the truth about Africa.

Introduction

African tyrants purposefully ignore lessons from past and recent history. Still, they should not disregard the advice of the similarly minded former dictator of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mr. Joseph Désiré Mobutu Sese Seko. At the United Nations meeting on October 4, 1973, he cried out for an end to apartheid in South Africa saying: *"A fruit falls when it is ripe. But before the hurricane or the storm of history, ripe or not, it falls anyway"*

The urgency for good governance and self-rule has intensified in some African nations since the popular protest which ended Burkina Faso's 27 years of dictatorship under President Blaise Compaore in October 2014. During and after the revolution, remaining constitutionally irreverent, African leaders took notice and began following every move of civil society groups to avoid similar surprises in their own countries.



The Triggers of October 2014 Burkina Faso Popular Uprising

President Blaise Compaore disregarded the persistent call of the Burkinabe to maintain constitutional term limits on the presidency. The people said a resounding no to constitutional dictatorship and a decisive yes to presidential term limits.

Response to the Trigger

Former government members turned opposition leaders, longtime civil society leaders and concerned citizens planned and organized a popular revolution to defend the rule of law. The people had enough of chronic unemployment, the monopoly of Compaore's family, a few elites of the nation's economy, corruption, injustice and more.

The Catholic Church Response to the Trigger

The Catholic bishops had also gone public with a pastoral letter urging the president not to amend Article 37 of the constitution. Although it is not uncommon for Catholic Bishops to collectively make their opinions known on controversial elections or power grabs by African leaders, this time their pastoral letter in opposition to President Compaore's power grab was very reassuring.

Picture Credit: www.lefaso.net



Action Plan Implemented

Speaking as one nation, the resistance warned parliament of the serious consequences if they voted for President Compaore to amend the constitution. In addition, they identified the homes and business addresses of each and every parliamentarian. The plan was to demolish what they built with money stolen from the people. During their protest, teams went to the homes of some members of parliament, secured their families and destroyed their homes. They detained others, but did not harm them. This exemplifies the level of discipline, leadership and commitment to nonviolence. They also organized simultaneous rallies across the nation, but the major one was in the capital city which numbered in the millions.

The Burkina Faso Master Plan

To ensure the whole nation was mobilized, the mastermind of the plan utilized all existing networks and efficiently organized cells of resistance in local communities and schools (universities) across the country. They reached out to traditional chiefs, particularly the Mossi chief, to seek their

The Role of the Army

Unlike Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the army sided with the President during the popular uprising, Burkina Faso's army played a key role in the power struggle. Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Zida, former head of the President Compaore's Presidential Guard unit, after disobeying orders from the president to use force against the people, he instead stood between the people and the president and negotiated a political compromise. President Compaore had asked that the people let him finish his term, but the people insisted that he resign. Instead of detaining Compaore they let him leave the country. With the help of French forces, Mr. Compaore made it out to Ivory Coast where he is enjoying life under the protection of his good friend, President Alassane Ouattara.



Photo credit: www.lefaso.net

General Gilbert Diendere Failed Coup further strengthens Burkina Faso's Democracy

Weeks before the presidential elections organized by the transitional government were to be held on October 11, 2015, the presidential guard under the leadership of General **Gilbert Diendere** staged a military coup. However, quickly the same people's army answered the people's call to defend the nation and its institutions. Within days they ended the coup. The resolve and courageous action of the army earned them more national trust and increased its credibility internationally as a republican army committed to democratic values. Many analysts believe that the military coup cemented the democratic process in Burkina Faso, brought its people together even more, boosted the country's stature in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The Civil Society Movement Behind the Fall of Blaise Compaore: The "Balais Citoyen"

"Balais Citoyen" literally means "Citizen's Broom". Obviously the name of the movement which was very instrumental in the fall of Blaise Compaore's tyranny is packed with meaning. This movement expanded upon a very familiar description of what government meant in Burkina Faso: dirty business which needed serious cleaning up. If the house is dirty, it must be cleaned. If your

house is too big and you cannot do it alone, you look for many brooms and a lot of help. This is how the Balais Citoyen lived up to its name.

The Role of Women in the fall of Blaise Compaore

Alongside the use of social media to mobilize the people, the Burkinabe tapped in the their traditional customs to bring out one of their most powerful constituencies in the nation: women. The women came out in numbers brandishing spatulas in the air as a sign of protest. This meant that they no longer recognized President Compaore as their leader.

Traditionally, the spatula, among other things, is a symbol of femininity and life as it is used by women to cook a variety of foods and dishes in the house. This household utensil is one of the powerful tools at women's disposal to say 'enough is enough' in many situations. When a woman decides to use this tool that means that her cry has fallen on deaf ears. If used by a woman as sign of protest against a husband it means that the man has lost any legitimacy in that home. It is one of the highest expressions of disgrace of a wife against her husband.

Picture Credit: www.lesafo.net



Remember the intent is central to the effectiveness of the use of this tool. Had President Compaore not listened to the voices of women, they had planned to escalate their actions by protesting naked. In their roles as mothers in the community, intentionally and publicly displaying their nakedness in protest against President Compaore was going to be a ritual to curse him. Any curse ritual in traditional Africa is taken seriously by the cursed. Some of the curses are specific, one of the most common being dying far away from one's hometown. While there are rituals to attempt to reverse curses, because curses are last resort to address an issue, the victim in most cases is let to deal with the consequences. It has to be noted that women have to have a role in the changes Africa is seeking for them to last.

Preventing Power Vacuum

The decision by power brokers in the revolution to chose Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Zida as prime minister of the transitional government. He was fit to hold that position because of his rank within the presidential guard and because his national and regional network was deemed to be an asset in ensuring order after the uprising, particularly considering the rise of terrorist activities in the neighboring countries of Niger and Mali.

Historical Significance of Burkina Faso's Successful Popular Revolution

The historic significance of the peaceful protest which defeated one of Africa's well-known dictators resounded across the world even reaching Western superpowers, whose long standing policies toward Africa contributed to the proliferation of dictatorial regimes and prevented the formation of strong institutions through democratic processes. Many political analysts and the majority of the people of Burkina Faso claim that the rejection of President Blaise Compaore also meant the rejection of French neo-colonialist policies in their country. The success of Burkina Faso is also an unequivocal answer to some western politicians who, since the Arab Spring, have been reluctant to support the voice of radical change. They argue against establishing the rule of law, stating that preserving the status quo avoids the risk of a power vacuum. They defend tyranny, arguing that the removal of dictators by popular revolution would lead to chaos, as evidenced in the cases of Egypt and Libya.

Other Civil Society Groups Follow the Burkina Faso Model

The success of the Burkinabe has inspired renewed hope and re-energized many civil society groups. In particular, the youth who face high unemployment in Africa. *The popular revolution in Burkina Faso provides an invaluable paradigm as one of the best ways to remove a dictator from power.*

One recent example less publicized but significant, is the January 2015 victory by the youth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). They protested against including in the electoral bill a provision which could have prolonged President Joseph Kabila's term by a couple of years. In Burundi, the civil society and the opposition parties fed off the energy from Burkina Faso and DRC to ensure President Pierre Nkurunziza respected the presidential term limit. Unfortunately Nkurunziza did not comply with articles 96 and 302 of the Burundian constitution which prohibited him to run for another term. The struggle in Burundi and the DRC continues.

Obviously Burkina Faso's successful and relatively peaceful removal President Compaore from power was the work of determined citizens and leaders who put the country ahead of their own personal interests. The unarmed protesters who died or were wounded in the defense of the rule of law must be recognized as African heroes.

Conclusion

The one and only condition to prevail against violent, heavy-handed regimes and opportunistic politicians, is an empowered, engaged and passionate civil society. Dictators know very well that their reign is not eternal. Their violence and oppression is nothing more than an ongoing strategy to postpone people's demand for accountability. The choice today is whether to fight

now or leave the fight for the next generation. To stand up to the challenge is more than an honor, it is the right thing to do. Ending unjust dictatorships will begin the next important chapter of Africa's political history, a transition from aid dependency to booming economy and peace.

Dictators who refuse to peacefully leave power take comfort in the impunity that former dictators and their collaborators enjoy where they found shelter. Thus, to end tyranny is to deny tyrants and their acolytes any safe heaven. This is why Ivory Coast government must hand over former Burkina Faso President Mr. Blaise Compaore to the new government to face justice.

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