Twitter Thread by Jason Hickel

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This week, 33 years ago, Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso, was assassinated in a French-backed coup. He aspired to an egalitarian, feminist society, and an economy built on self-sufficiency, ecological regeneration, and independence from Western powers.



As debt crises mount across Africa, his ideas are more vital now than ever. I wrote about Sankara's legacy in these two pages from The Divide:

The Hidden Power of Debt

Whenever I explain the history of structural adjustment in lectures and talks, I am always asked the same question: why would global South countries agree to this? Why didn't they just default on their loans instead of submitting to remote-control power by Washington?

Technically, they could have. Defaulting on the debt would have liberated the global South from the stranglehold of the international banks, forcing the banks to absorb the fallout from their risky lending. But in reality this was not an option, for there was always the threat of US military invasion if countries decided to default. Having witnessed the experiences of Iran, Guatemala, the Congo and Chile, the governments of global South countries knew that to threaten Washington's economic interests – or, indeed, even the interests of powerful US banks – was to invite the possibility of a US-backed coup. This threat was always very real. The developing world had no choice but to play by Washington's rules.

This brutal fact crystallised very clearly in the story of Thomas Sankara, which came to serve as a kind of cautionary tale. When he became president of Burkina Faso in the 1980s, Sankara – a thirty-three-year-old known for his warm smile and trendy beret – made the debt issue one of his main concerns. Affectionately known as Africa's Che, he is remembered for a speech he delivered at Addis Ababa in 1987 at the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity, to a room packed full of heads of state and government ministers from across the continent. The audience was gripped by the words of the young man who stood so bravely before them. He said things they would never dare to say. Some exchanged glances of shocked disbelief, others looked worried, half expecting him to be shot mid-sentence. His passion rippled through the room, and when he finished the audience erupted in thunderous applause. One could almost feel a revolution stirring.

Today, Sankara's legacy is inspiring a new generation of revolutionary thinkers and activists across the continent and beyond. As Sankara himself put it, with uncanny prescience, “You can assassinate revolutionaries, but you cannot kill ideas”.

Sankara knew his assassination was coming. Speaking to African leaders at the OAU, he said "I would like this conference to clearly declare that we will not repay the debt; we must do it together, to avoid being assassinated individually..."

"...If Burkina Faso is the only one to refuse, I will not be here at the next conference."

"Let's create a united front against the debt. And let's stop competing with each other. Our lands are rich. We have plenty of manpower, and a large market. Let the African market belong to Africans. Let's manufacture in Africa and consume in Africa..."

"...Let's produce what we need and consume what we produce, instead of importing goods. I, along with my delegation, we are dressed by our weavers, with cotton from our farmers. Not a single thread comes from Europe or America. This is how you live with freedom and dignity."