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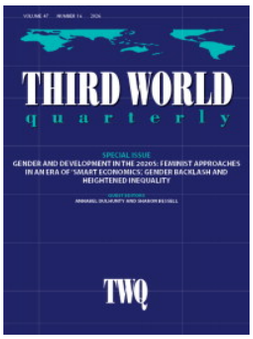
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Captain Ibrahim Traoré: a dramaturgy of crisis and sovereignty in Burkina Faso

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ABSTRACT

Since seizing power in Burkina Faso in 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traoré has established himself as a disruptive figure in the volatile political landscape of the Sahel. The article situates his presidential style within the framework of populism as performance. It argues that his leadership exemplifies how postcolonial populist actors mobilise crisis narratives and anti-elite rhetoric to reimagine sovereignty. In contexts of perceived incomplete decolonisation, his populist performance often adopts a distinctly anti-imperialist inflexion. It recasts sovereignty as a struggle against lingering foreign domination. However, Traoré's populist style poses a challenge to a literature that limits the significance of populism to the crisis of the liberal order. Instead, his style suggests a more serious look at African decolonial imaginaries as a breeding ground for populist rhetoric. The marches of support for his regime in Western cities and the strong digital cult on social media reflect the young African leader's ability to appeal to the affective charge of Pan-Africanism and the wounded sense that decolonisation has yet to be complete.

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Introduction

The global rise of populist leadership has reshaped how identity and state sovereignty are enacted in domestic and foreign policy. An important body of scholarship has examined the influence of movements such as Donald Trump's 'America First', Brexit, and far-right parties across Europe, and their impact on foreign relations (Inglehart and Norris 2017). Recent analysis has also examined similar movements in the Global South and their implications for international relations more broadly (Pereira 2023). Examples of scholarship include the transnational appeal of Hugo Chavez's populism (Simon and Parody 2023) or the exploration of regional contexts beyond Europe (Giurlando and Wajner 2023). In West Africa, a few leaders stand out in this regard, such as Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the military President of Burkina Faso.

On 30 April 2025, thousands of protesters marched through the streets of London, following a route between the US and French embassies. The demonstrators chanted 'hands off Traoré' while many of them held signs reading 'no to colonialism'. A coalition of grassroots Pan-African networks had organised the march with the aim of expressing solidarity with

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and support of the African diaspora in London to the President of Burkina Faso. He 'has captured hearts and minds around the world', as similar popular marches took place in the streets of major Western cities such as New York, Paris and Rome (Chothia 2025).

Captain Traoré's newfound charisma shines as much in the eyes of many of his supporters from the African diaspora as in the admiration of many of his countrymen in Ouagadougou. Above all, I read this phenomenon as the result of a cleverly crafted rhetoric. Traoré's media appearances are skilfully orchestrated. He constantly castigates Western imperialism. His rhetoric takes a dig at France and the United States as the architects of political fragility and underdevelopment in Burkina Faso. Since he acceded to power in 2022, Traoré has distanced himself from the conventions of traditional diplomacy, choosing a confrontational tone. His public speeches have become acts of performance. He indicts the Western powers that he accuses of harbouring imperialist ambitions, and the national political elites that he qualifies as traitors and corrupt agents.

In this article, I explore how Traoré's political style uses performance as a tool for popular mobilisation through a rhetoric of war that seeks to reclaim sovereignty. I examine the discursive devices that allow Traoré to project a posture of revolutionary leader through the production of a national narrative. Concepts such as sovereignty, crisis, dignity and the antagonism between 'patriots' and 'traitors' are overloaded in his speech. In turn, I mobilise them to scrutinise his leadership style and its impact on foreign policy and statehood in Burkina Faso. I start by asking the following question: how does Traoré's rhetoric operationalise the global populist script of sovereignty and institutional contestation in the West African context? How does it affect people's ideas of statehood and governance in Burkina Faso?

This article situates Traoré's presidential style within the expanding scholarship on populism. It argues that his leadership exemplifies how postcolonial populist actors mobilise crisis narratives and anti-elite rhetorics to reimagine sovereignty. I foreground how, in postcolonial contexts, populist discourse may also function as a revolutionary script. Such a script, with Hugo Chavez, for example, is aimed at contesting global hierarchies and appealing to transnational decolonial imaginaries (Simon and Parody 2023). In contexts of perceived incomplete decolonisation, this populist rhetoric often adopts a distinctly anti-imperialist inflexion, as Traoré demonstrates. It recasts sovereignty as a struggle against lingering foreign domination.

More importantly, this study adopts a definition of populism as a political performance to analyse how Traoré enacts populist sovereignty through symbolic and rhetorical practices. Building on the work of Alexander (2004) and Moffitt (2016), I treat political performance as a public staging of legitimacy. Populist leaders, especially in postcolonial contexts, construct crisis, polarise morality and dramatise authority through speech, symbolism and bodily presence. Traoré's leadership is thus approached as a performative project that redefines sovereignty through confrontation with imperial legacies and global norms.

However, an important literature locates the rise of populism in the crisis of liberalism (Kaul 2018; Kriesi and Pappas 2015). I contend that such a Eurocentric perspective is narrow and misses the unique trajectory of populist governments outside the West. I set my analysis in contrast with the liberal frameworks to offer a dual contribution. First, I foreground decolonial and panafrican imaginaries as the social fabric through which populist sovereignty is operationalised in the postcolonial landscape of West Africa. Second, I develop an affective conceptualisation of populism to account for Captain Traoré's transnational appeal to the

imaginaries of postcolonial statehood and governance in Burkina Faso. In doing so, my argument bridges the concepts of sovereignty and crisis across African studies, populism theory, and international political discourse. The article contributes to rethinking populism as a global phenomenon shaped by uneven histories of empire, development and resistance.

The first empirical layer of this article comprises a purposive sample of political speeches, media appearances, protest footage and digital content from 2022 to 2026. The key data include four televised addresses made by Traoré (Traoré 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). These speeches lay out his assessment of the geopolitical contexts of Burkina Faso. They provide a mirror reflecting his understanding of authority and legitimacy in the volatile security landscape of the Sahel. They present the military regime as a transformative project that seeks to reclaim sovereignty from imperialist forces. More importantly, they offer a vision of national liberation, suggesting that decolonisation remains incomplete. The second layer of data comprises fieldwork interviews. I spent six weeks in Ouagadougou in February and March 2026 collecting data through focus group discussions. I conducted a total of five focus groups made up of about six or seven participants each. In the first two groups, the participants were mainly craftsmen and craftswomen recruited through a gatekeeper I met at the artisanal village. A different gatekeeper set up two further separate groups with artists and a local vigilante group. I convened a final group of participants outside the Thomas Sankara Memorial. I asked participants questions about their everyday lives and their feelings about the current political situation in Burkina Faso. I also conducted two additional semi-structured interviews with an academic and a union leader. Most of the participants were male, between 18 and 50 years old. First, the rhetorical analysis identifies narrative tropes, moral binaries and crisis construction. Analytically, the data were coded for recurring themes such as sovereignty, crisis, (anti)imperialism and betrayal/traitors. Second, it examines the symbolic and embodied gestures, dress, rituals and spatial settings to interpret how sovereignty is physically performed. Finally, it explores the resonance of Traoré's discourse across domestic and diasporic publics, through both the focus group discussions and digital engagements. This approach reveals how populist sovereignty is co-produced through performance, affect and global circulation in postcolonial political space.

There are five parts to the remainder of this paper. In the first section, I outline the theoretical framework, drawing on populism as a political performance to understand how leaders construct legitimacy through rhetorical confrontation. I then move to situate Traoré's rise within Burkina Faso's security collapse and growing anti-French sentiment. The section 'Populism as performative sovereignty' explores how his discourse constructs moral binaries and reclaims sovereignty through anti-imperialist language. 'Performing crisis: a rhetoric of combatants and resistance' analyses the role of crisis rhetoric and war metaphors in mobilising popular support. Finally, 'Transnational amplification and the limits of anti-imperialist performance' examines the transnational amplification of Traoré's populist message, highlighting its resonance among African diasporas and digital publics. Together, these sections show how Traoré's discourse bridges domestic power consolidation and global resistance narratives within a postcolonial populist imaginary.

Theoretical framework

I frame the discussion around three concepts which I mobilise as complementary analytical lenses: performance, crisis and postcolonial sovereignty.

An emerging scholarship points to the limitations of understanding populism as an ideology or a discourse. Instead, people such as Moffitt (2016) suggest looking at it as a political performance. The classical theory, found for example in the works of Mudde (2004) and Kaltwasser (2012), defines populism as a 'thin ideology'. These researchers built their understanding on the binary and antagonistic constructions of the 'corrupt elites' against the 'pure people' vying to regain control of popular sovereignty. Another strand of the literature recommends a definition of populism as a discourse (Chryssogelos 2020), directed against the elites and rooted in a 'rhetoric invoking the supremacy of popular sovereignty' (Aslanidis 2016, 97). However, both approaches have been criticised because they lack the analytical depth of understanding how populist leaders enact and maintain power in everyday political life. Emerging from this criticism is the definition of populism as a political performance.

For Moffitt (2016), populism is a dynamic performance in which the leaders actively stage crisis, blame the elites and claim to embody the authentic voice of 'the people'. Populism as a political performance refers to the recognisable way in which politicians communicate to promote their agendas: what they say and how they say it (Ostiguy 2017). The political performance comprises both the rhetoric and aspects such as rhetorical techniques, body language, clothing, tone, etc. (Bossetta 2017). To that extent, populism as a political performance moves beyond discourse as a rhetoric to analyse specific communicative repertoires: simplicity, bad manners, emotional appeal and confrontation of established norms. The definition of populism as a political performance is therefore interested in both the rhetorical discourse and the dramaturgy surrounding its delivery in an attempt to appeal to the people against the elites (Moffitt and Tormey 2014).

In the African context, Resnick (2017) points to the difficulty of classifying populism within a homogeneous corpus. From Michael Sata's anti-Chinese populism in Zambia (Fraser 2017) to Bobi Wine's intergenerational populism in Uganda (Melchiorre 2023) or Julius Malema's anti-Boer stance in South Africa (Fölscher, de Jager, and Nyenhuis 2021), populist leaders on the continent assert their rhetoric on a wide spectrum of constructed political crises. Similar to those examples, Traoré's populist discourse stages a moral struggle while claiming to restore popular agency. However, he departs from these cases through his anti-imperialist stance against external domination. His populist firebrand dramatises an antagonistic foreign policy style that purports to reclaim sovereignty through confrontational speech acts that challenge the international liberal order. The performative aspects of his populism intersect with postcolonial resistance and African unity. Through this lens, Traoré's populism emulates legendary figures such as Thomas Sankara, also from Burkina Faso, Sekou Toure or Patrice Lumumba, therefore expanding the reach of 'the people' far beyond the boundaries of Burkina Faso. Unlike other forms of populism seen on the continent, I contend that what makes Traoré's discourse unique is its resonance with an affective audience which he captivates by fusing military authority, sovereignty and anti-imperialist performance.

I contextualise this discourse within the longer tradition of postcolonial rhetorical resistance (Mbembe 2001). This entails reading Traoré's anti-imperialist and Pan-Africanist rhetoric as part of an enduring repertoire of African political language that draws on the memory of decolonisation struggles. His revolutionary Pan-Africanism and defiant sovereignty claims situate his appeal as a reinvention of historical discourses that continue to structure political identity and transnational solidarity.

The crisis of the state and Traoré's rise to power

While Traoré seized power through a military coup in 2022 amid growing jihadist insurgency, the postcolonial analytical lens allows me to read his ascent as a manifestation of the historically limited sovereignty in Burkina Faso (Young 1994). This section frames his rise to power within the context of the crisis of the postcolonial state.

Until the fall of President Blaise Compaoré in 2014, Burkina Faso had been viewed as a relatively stable postcolonial state. Through a combination of authoritarian control, neopatrimonial elite alliances and Western patronage, Compaoré maintained a precarious balance of internal order (Eizenga and Villalón 2020). His regime favoured elite reproduction at the expense of democratic accountability. Compaoré's departure was triggered by popular protests that successfully marked a democratic turning point. Nevertheless, he had managed to ensure superficial stability throughout his years in power.

Consequently, his demise created a rupture following the dissolution of his repressive security apparatus that kept insurgent threats at bay. With the loss of centralised coercive capacity, Burkina Faso quickly became vulnerable to jihadist movements spilling over from northern Mali (Haavik, Bøås, and Iocchi 2022). As terror organisations affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State expanded across the Sahel, Burkina Faso's national army struggled to confront them effectively. Beginning in 2016, vast areas in the East, North and West slipped from government control. The growth of the insurgency exposed both the military limitations and the deeper political fragilities of the postcolonial state.

The challenge to the state's sovereignty also limited its ability to protect its citizens and cast doubt on its very purpose. As the state retreated, it enabled the establishment of parallel orders. Jihadist factions such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP) imposed rules grounded in shari'a law, religious education and customary mediation (Charbonneau 2021). In doing so, they directly challenged both the formal institutions of the state and the moral legitimacy of traditional authorities. Their emergence as quasi-governing actors introduced new Islamic moral economies and intensified competition over which sovereign speaks for justice and order in peripheral areas. This unravelling illustrated the fragility of statehood in the region, as Young (1994) has argued. The colonial legacy left behind institutions poorly adapted to local political realities, with limited bureaucratic capacity beyond urban centres. The state's retreat from peripheral zones revealed the shallow penetration of republican governance since independence. The postcolonial state rapidly eroded in these regions under the pressure of insurgent groups.

The insurgent governance regime also revealed the extent to which the postcolonial state had lost its symbolic authority. In rural areas, where services had long been intermittent and corruption rife, jihadist factions were not universally rejected. Some communities saw them as more responsive than the distant and faltering government. The crisis of security doubled with a crisis of meaning, echoing Mbembe's (2001) critique of postcolonial power as inherently fragmentary and performative. In affected rural areas, the state no longer appeared as a guarantor of order but as an irrelevant actor.

The fragmentation of state power and legitimacy unfolded in tandem with increased foreign military involvement. France and the United States provided substantial counterterrorism support to Burkina Faso. Between 300 and 400 French soldiers were stationed in the country until 2023. France also led Operation Barkhane and supported the G5 Sahel Joint Force, ostensibly to bolster regional stability (Charbonneau 2021). Yet these interventions

failed to deliver security. Instead, they exposed what Grovogui (1996) characterises as the 'quasi-sovereignty' of African states. I borrow his concept to refer to a nominal independence undermined by the externalisation of key state functions, particularly in security and finance. And, as jihadist violence intensified and state authority continued to unravel, a wave of popular disillusionment followed. A shift in public perceptions came to view France's involvement as symptomatic of deeper neocolonial entanglements. By 2022, anti-French protests in the main cities of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso had become common, with slogans such as 'La France dégage!' ('France, get out!'). Protestors articulated a potent mix of historical grievance and contemporary rage (Sandor and Berlingozzi 2026).

I situate the rise of Traoré in the shadow of the continued decay of the postcolonial sovereign state and its inability to fulfil the promises of decolonisation. And as the young artillery officer seized the momentum, a rhetorical performance, shaped around the idea of reclaiming national sovereignty from imperialist powers, would soon constitute his hallmark. In December 2022, three months into power, he made a speech in which he presented himself as the custodian of the popular revolt to reclaim national sovereignty:

> A few weeks ago, the country's destiny changed on September 30. We said that we are revolted and that we could not bear it anymore, and today, on the anniversary of Independence Day, we are even more revolted. The fight for full independence began a few weeks ago. And this fight necessarily involves weapons, but it is also through our values, our behaviour and the recovery of our economy. The battle against the enemy occupying our lands is beginning. This battle is in its preamble. (Traoré 2022) (author's translation)

During his 2023 Independence Day address, he castigated Western powers for 'imposing' terrorism on Burkina Faso and for sending a 'horde of criminals who kill men, women and children'. In the same speech, he positioned himself and his government as the voice for change, claiming that 'the people have entrusted us with a mission'. More importantly, Traoré connected the popular frustration with a postcolonial order that had failed to deliver either dignity or autonomy because imperialism remained active domestically. His speech presents him as the embodiment of the people's indignation: 'We have decided, in all conscience and soul, to take over the destiny of this homeland and to wage war' against imperialism (Traoré 2023) (author translation). Traoré sees himself as a moral crusader committed to liberating Burkina Faso from the guardianship of foreign powers.

Traoré swiftly translated this rhetoric into action. He ordered French troops to vacate the Kamboinsin base near Ouagadougou and suspended military accords with France (France 24 2023). His administration sought new security partnerships, notably with Russia and regional actors less entangled in the colonial past (ICG 2022). These moves were designed to consolidate legitimacy through performance. They are presented as an act of decolonisation and a rebuke of externally dictated security paradigms. These bold moves amplified a regional trend whereby Sahelian states increasingly reject French tutelage and experiment with alternative security arrangements (Charbonneau 2021). His performance captivates the Burkinabè anti-French movement which represents both a local rebellion against perceived foreign meddling and an attempt to reclaim popular sovereignty, as the next section shows.

Populism as performative sovereignty

The antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite' lies at the heart of the scholarship on populism (Canovan 2004). The people/elite dichotomy remains central in the

classical theory of populism as an ideology, which simplifies political space into a binary opposition: a morally pure and unified people versus a corrupt, self-serving elite (Stanley 2008). However, this normative view has since been challenged by scholars arguing that the people do not pre-exist populist discourse but are actively constructed through political articulation. In the following discussion, I examine how Traoré legitimises authority by constructing a normative idea of the 'people'.

Populist leaders craft the people in opposition to the elite, but this construction is context-dependent and performative (Katsambekis 2022). Küppers (2025) further suggests that these constructions are not only discursively dynamic but also socially negotiated. Such binary construction is better understood through what Moffitt (2016) calls the populist performance of crisis and antagonism. He argues that populist leaders constantly construct a sense of a permanent crisis, and they stage themselves as the authentic protectors of the masses against imagined enemies. Indeed, this clear construction of the enemy is ultimately what makes Traoré's rhetoric more effective.

I argue that Traoré's political authority is sustained and legitimised through a carefully constructed rhetorical performance that positions him as an uncompromising voice against imperialism and neo-colonial exploitation. His speech is a performative act that both diagnoses the nation's crisis and stages him as the authentic embodiment of popular resistance. This section examines how his anti-imperialist discourse operates through the key devices of populist performance: moral polarisation, crisis narration and the personal enactment of sovereign power. However, Traoré's speech is not just a circumstantial rhetoric. From Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, it is part of a trend common to the West African military regimes that combines military struggle, mental decolonisation and mass mobilisation, and which calls for a refoundation of popular power.

The populist construction of an imperial enemy

Traoré's public speeches constantly create a moral dichotomy between the 'patriots' and the 'traitors', an approach central to populist rhetoric (Hunger 2024). His Manichaean view of the revolution sets on one side the 'good people', the poor rural communities, the youth volunteers and the soldiers. He opposes these social categories to the 'bad people', or the corrupt elite supported by foreign sponsors, on the other side.

During his 11 July speech, he suggested a triangular construction of the enemies that work against the sovereignty of Burkina Faso (Traoré 2024b). In this discourse, he identified the three figures as: the external enemy, the internal enemy and the moral enemy. For him, the external enemy refers broadly to Western imperialism. In this category, he designated France, the former coloniser, alongside multinational corporations and foreign powers such as the US. He repeatedly castigated them for their manipulation and exploitation of people, going so far as accusing them of acting in complicity with terror groups. He then moved to chastise the internal enemy, broadly referring to corrupt intellectuals, villages complicit with terrorists and the magistrates perceived as unfair. He concluded his triangle with the moral enemy. In this category, he conflates those who refuse to fight, those who make a pact with terrorists and people who advocate dialogue as a solution to the security crisis.

However, foreign powers remain the main target of Traoré's rhetoric in this tripartite designation of the enemies of Burkina Faso's sovereignty. The designation of internal enemies as 'local servants of imperialism' constitutes a central element of the discursive strategy,

while imperialist powers are designated as directly responsible for the security chaos, even going so far as to be accused of having 'sent a horde of criminals'. Traoré repeatedly names France and the United States as external actors who have, in his words, 'never let this land breathe freely since the first day of independence'. In a widely circulated speech at a meeting with regional leaders in the North of Burkina Faso, Traoré declared:

> We are no longer waging a war against terrorism, but a war for our independence. The imperialists do not want to see Africa develop. They provoke conflicts, plunder and steal our resources. It is our duty to fight for our liberation […]. Burkina Faso will become what they never imagined. (Traoré 2025) author's translation.

This statement illustrates two essential features of his anti-imperialist stance. First, it describes poverty and insecurity in Burkina Faso as the continued action and responsibility of foreign governments. By invoking a continuous historical struggle between the African nation and the Western powers, the rhetoric links contemporary insecurity and poverty to an unfinished decolonisation. Second, it dramatises a moral confrontation, a clear 'us versus them' narrative, that simplifies complex geopolitical realities into a popular storyline easily absorbed by audiences both at home and among African diasporas. Fundamentally, he situates the people as the victims of imperial policies, and whose precarious conditions can only end if they rise against the foreign powers. As much as his rhetoric poses a clear diagnosis of Burkina Faso's poor security and economic conditions, he also presents himself as the solution to the crisis if people dare mobilise behind his leadership.

Traoré's discourse thus resonates with the established Sahelian narrative of 'betrayed independence', which has gained renewed salience as repeated coups in Mali, Guinea and Niger have all evoked similar justifications: failed governance, foreign meddling and the need to reclaim true sovereignty. By couching counterterrorism failures as evidence of a deliberate imperial strategy to destabilise the region and extract resources, Traoré reframes Burkina Faso's crisis not as a technical security problem but as an existential national struggle. He presents himself as the righteous leader of a war for sovereignty and liberation in the twenty-first century.

Recoding sovereignty

One of the most distinctive elements of Traoré's anti-imperialist discourse is how it re-signifies national sovereignty. Unlike his predecessors, who framed sovereignty within international partnerships and development assistance, Traoré constructs it as antagonistic self-reliance. He often equates the presence of foreign troops with the erosion of national dignity. In his 11 July 2024 declaration, he presented the reclaiming of sovereignty as an existential question that could only be achieved through military means:

> We have no choice but to fight. And we have chosen to fight. And it is through this that we will be free, that we will be truly independent.
>
> […]
>
> If we don't fight, they will come and get us from our homes, like an animal from a chicken coop or a sheepfold. Every morning, they will choose the one they want to go and execute in the public square to scare others, to go and cut off hands or feet in the public square to scare others. That's how their tactics are. We will fight.

> And we will give ourselves the means to achieve this. If tomorrow we encounter obstacles, we will still come to the people to ask for more sacrifices in order to be able to achieve the goal. (Traoré 2024b) author's translation.

In another speech performed in a show of patriotism during a flag-raising ceremony, he once again castigated France's imperialism:

> To break with the imperialist forces, we need to terminate the military cooperation agreements. The problem lies in the colonial defence agreements that have been signed with France since independence. They make our armies too weak so that France can continue to exist here. (Traoré 2025) author's translation.

This statement operationalises what scholars like Wajner, Destradi, and Zürn (2024) describe as the sovereignty dimension of contemporary populism. This means the rejection of supranational constraints and external governance, which are enacted rhetorically as the re-taking of decision-making power by the people. In the case of Traoré, the performative script serves to literalise his words in policy. For example, by ordering French troops to vacate bases and pivoting towards alternative partners like Russia, he also reinforced his image as an action-oriented revolutionary (France 24 2023).

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined how populist regimes engage with international relations, moving beyond domestic-focused analyses to explore their distinctive approaches to global politics. Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann (2021) and Löfflmann (2022) argue that populist leaders often personalise foreign policy and adopt anti-elitist and anti-globalist rhetoric. Giurlando and Wajner (2023) broaden the analysis with regional perspectives, revealing that populist foreign policies are context-dependent. For instance, in Latin America, populism often expresses anti-imperialist narratives, while in Europe, it aligns more with Euroscepticism and nativist nationalism. In this regard, Traoré's Manichaean approach, which pits 'the people' against the 'imperialists', is a combination of both anti-imperialist narratives and the subversion of regional multilateral institutions through international alliances (Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019). Such performance effectively justifies Burkina Faso's gradual withdrawal from traditional alliances such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its rapprochement with other 'brother' states, particularly within the framework of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Traoré's rhetoric implements a strategy of symbolic inversion, characteristic of many decolonising and revolutionary discourses, allowing for the reversal of colonial stigmas. It is no longer Africa that is backwards, submissive or corrupt, but the Western powers that appear cynical, manipulative and morally flawed. By carrying out such an inversion, the discourse produces a revaluation of the Burkinabé people and their role in world history. As I show in the following section, this strategy of symbolic reversal recalls the rhetoric of leaders such as Thomas Sankara, Patrice Lumumba and Hugo Chávez, who have used language to subvert the discursive hierarchies inherited from colonialism.

Performing crisis: a rhetoric of combatants and resistance

Crisis occupies a constitutive role in populist politics. In the backdrop, it functions as a dynamic tool of mobilisation and identity construction. Stavrakakis et al. (2018) assert that crisis narratives are essential to both populist and anti-populist discourse, shaping political

boundaries and legitimising action. Kaul (2018), for example, links populism to a broader crisis of liberalism. The disillusionment with liberal-democratic norms fuels the European elite's populist appeals to authentic identity and sovereignty. Kriesi and Pappas (2015) offer a nuanced view, suggesting that while crises can catalyse populist movements, they do not automatically produce them. For me, however, these views insisting on the crisis of liberalism remain Eurocentric. I view the rise of populism as dependent on specific political and institutional contexts. In Burkina Faso, I suggest looking at the affective charge of postcolonial resistance and African unity as the fabric against which the populist appeal is printed. In the following discussion, I show that what remains common between the dominant scholarship above and my own approach is the performative aspects of crisis.

For Moffitt (2016), the theatricality of modern populism is performed on the stage of a manufactured crisis through which the leader appeals to 'the people'. He therefore sees crisis as an 'internal feature of populism' (Moffitt 2016, 119). Rightly so with Traoré. His speeches are generally structured around an explicitly warlike rhetoric. His choice of vocabulary constantly refers to combat: 'Comrades fighting for freedom, for sovereignty and true independence'. The speech is replete with a lexical field of war that highlights ideas of resistance, sacrifice and national dignity. The people of Burkina Faso are described as 'valiant', 'resilient' and 'committed'. The systematic use of the term 'comrades' places the discourse within a revolutionary and populist tradition, inherited from figures such as Thomas Sankara.

The war is presented as existential: 'Homeland or death, we will prevail' (*la patrie ou la mort, nous vaincrons*), a phrase that directly positions Captain Traore as a heir to the revolutionary heritage of Thomas Sankara. The justification for the war is based on an explicit denunciation of terrorism as a 'violent manifestation of imperialism'. This position complicates the classic security interpretation and places the conflict within a perspective of ideological and historical warfare.

This language plays into a logic of total mobilisation, in which every citizen is called upon to become an active participant in the struggle against imperialist forces. The structure of the text reinforces this rhetoric, allowing for an argumentative progression that moves into different stages. The rhetoric starts from a damning diagnosis of postcolonial crisis to a call for a struggle to reclaim sovereignty before outlining the post-victory period. This highly dramatised oratorical staging recalls the classic techniques of persuasion described by Moffitt (2015). I agree with him that populist actors actively *perform* crisis through rhetorical and media strategies that amplify a sense of breakdown, urgency and elite failure, regardless of objective conditions.

From a discourse analytic perspective, Traoré's speeches are also marked by frequent use of repetition, plain language and rhetorical questions. I have identified several hallmarks of populist performance that amplify the perception of urgency and moral clarity (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). For example, in his 11 July address, he stated: 'Haven't these intellectuals read history? Don't they know the history of this world? Perhaps it's out of dishonesty or for a few dollars that they always preach for the imperialists?' (Traoré 2024b) author's translation.

First, this structure foregrounds an inclusive moral community of patriots, and contrasts it with 'they', the unreliable intellectuals and elites who side with the imperialist outsiders – the outsiders who are accused of past interventions that have allegedly deepened the insecurity they promised to end (Charbonneau 2021). The repeated use of rhetorical questions and emphatic answers works performatively to produce assent and emotional identification among listeners. This identification of the intellectuals as

'traitors' is central to populist dramaturgy, as highlighted by Moffitt (2016, 65). Below is an excerpt of Traoré's speech during the 'Patriotic and Civic Day', which he instituted in 2023 to mark the revolutionary legacy of Thomas Sankara's Discours d'Orientation Politique (DOP). In the speech, we can read how he performs the distinction between 'patriots' and 'traitors' while calling on the people to be 'patriots'.

> Dear compatriots,
>
> The enemies of the fatherland are the traitors and their accomplices. This second phase of the National Patriotic and Civic Day is placed under the theme: 'For a strong and sovereign nation, let's not betray our homeland!'
>
> How do you recognise the traitors of the fatherland? They are ready to sell their country. They collaborate with the enemy by providing sensitive and confidential information to destroy the country and for selfish interests.
>
> In times of war, they help the enemy in espionage actions, or by providing logistics. They are co-authors of the death of their brothers.
>
> Traitors are also those who are in league with a foreign power to sabotage our country's infrastructure, military or even economic capabilities. Traitors are also those who desert their position at a time when the country needs them most. Don't be traitors.
>
> Every Burkinabé must be vigilant and commit to banishing treachery in their daily actions. For our Nation, from now on, treason will be the most serious criminal act as it happens in States that really want to assume their sovereignty.
>
> The painful events that we have experienced in recent months in our country bear the mark of traitors. This reminds us of the dramatic events of October 15, 1987, which caused the death of President Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara and interrupted the revolutionary momentum of 1983. This is a perfect illustration of betrayal. To build a strong and sovereign Burkinabé nation, it is always necessary to have the spirit of patriotism and to mobilise the popular masses at all times. (Traoré 2024a) author's translation.

However, part of the appeal of the populist leaders to the people rests in their ability to portray themselves as ordinary people. They dissociate themselves from the established elites and politicians whom they describe as out of touch with the everyday experience of citizens. In Traoré's case, this dramaturgy goes so far as to stage football games where he appears joyfully playing alongside teams of professionals. Similarly, the official webpage of the presidency describes him as the 'natural captain' of his team.

And to many people, he is indeed an ordinary man, just like any other Burkinabé who struggles to make ends meet. The following quote from a participant illustrates the image of the ordinary leader:

> He isn't on the money. He is not masquerading politics. He's someone who hustled like us [C'est quelqu'un qui a galéré comme nous]. He was like us. He ate riz sauce [a cheap staple food] like us. We even ate better than he did. He has been on the front lines. You can't be on the front lines and be able to eat as good food as you want.[1] Author's translation.

Another striking aspect of performing 'ordinariness' lies in the narrative and emotional dimensions of the populist speech. In his rhetoric, Traoré incorporates several stories of human suffering, such as the story of the one-armed man from Timbuktu, a victim of terrorist horror whom he met and took pity on while serving in a unit of Burkinabé soldiers as part of the

United Nations peacekeeping mission in Mali. These stories, strategically inserted, serve to arouse indignation. They create a sense of identification among the audience and also justify the radical nature of political choices. Emotion here becomes a major political resource that allows for the overcoming of partisan divisions. The performance of 'ordinariness' reinforces the neutralisation of rational criticism and the forging of a sense of wounded but resilient community. In this register, the speech is not addressed to voters, but to brothers in arms, comrades in struggle, a people in resistance.

Second, as much as they appear ordinary, populist leaders also need to cast an image of themselves as extraordinary citizens, rising above the people (Moffitt 2016, 70). Traoré's rhetorical pattern transforms the leader's speech into a communal ritual. Each public address becomes an act of reaffirming collective resolve and a re-enactment of the moral frontier between patriots and traitors. His frequent live broadcasts, village tours and direct dialogues with youth militias are choreographed performances that restage the same central narrative: Burkina Faso under siege and Traoré as its self-sacrificing sentinel.

Effectively, this narrative is well-received and reproduced at the bottom level. 'IB [this is what Traoré is affectionately called] is the man that we needed at this exact time', claimed a man.[2] 'He is following in the path of Thomas Sankara', another man echoed. He then continued: 'Today, I am reassured that he is ready to offer his chest and take a bullet for the people. He is ready to die for the people'.[3] Author's translation.

While Traoré cultivated his connection with the people, his regime has been accused of the forced disappearance and unlawful arrest of many dissenting voices. He has since banned political parties and claimed that democracy contributes to the political instability of Burkina Faso. During my interview with a union leader, he confirmed to me his fear of expressing his criticisms of the regime openly. He has stopped using social media to publicise his opinions.[4] Despite this crackdown on freedom, I was surprised at how so many people supported Traoré's decision. A participant made the following comment:

> What have these politicians brought to us? What do they actually bring to us? What is democracy in this country? Holding rigged elections, and then they say that this one won, when we know that it wasn't him who won? Is that what we call a democracy? Then we are making a progressive revolution now.[5] Author's translation.

In a separate discussion, another person clearly reinforced the message: 'the struggle continues until death. We are proud of him, and we support him for life'.[6] The following section examines how the popularity of Traoré's rhetoric translates into legitimacy for his authority.

Transnational amplification and the limits of anti-imperialist performance

Domestically, Traoré's government faces the challenge of converting the moral authority of his anti-imperialist rhetoric into effective state capacity. For many of his supporters, he represents a genuine departure from the governance of the postcolonial state in Burkina Faso. In the following discussion, I explore how his rhetoric effectively converts into legitimacy for his authority.

To many people, Traoré is a leader who can bring about the change needed to make their lives better. A craftsman whom I met at the artisanal village in Ouagadougou told me the following:

> People who are abroad think we have no reason to love IB. No. He is someone who has visions for this country. Everyone sees that, it's clear. There are no shenanigans, everything is clear. Everything he does is 100% clear. Everyone sees the clarity of things. So, we can evaluate him for ourselves. We know it's hard, but we trust in him. Even if we don't benefit from his actions, our children or grandchildren will benefit. That's it. So, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, I'll be for IB.[7] Author's translation.

I challenged a participant to tell me exactly what makes them more optimistic about the governance under Traoré compared to previous regimes. They mentioned the new 'patriotic taxes', introduced by Traoré in an effort to raise domestic funds for development expenditure, and said: 'It's transparency. We can see where the money is going. That's what makes you want to contribute'.[8]

Talking about the same taxes, another participant adds: 'It's hard, but we're happy to do it. But when you know where your money goes, it doesn't mean anything to you. There must be no worries. Before him, you can contribute, but you're not going to hear where the money goes'.[9] Author's translation.

Indeed, since rising to power, Traoré has put on a spectacle of infrastructure development. *Faso Mebo*, the public agency in charge of construction and civil engineering, which translates literally into 'Building the Nation', has completed several infrastructure projects across the major cities. In Ouagadougou, the sight of its convoys comprising dozens of construction trucks and heavy machinery crisscrossing the city has now become common. The constant movements of these vehicles remind the residents, and indeed the visitors like me, that the nation is under construction.

During my trip, the regime also put on show the televised trial of judges accused of corruption. The government portrayed the move as a relentless resolve to fight against corruption. And for my participants, this is yet another example that Traoré, unlike his predecessors, is a leader capable of putting his words into action. I received the following feedback from a participant:

> Today, if you are a civil servant and you have embezzled public money, even if it is 5,000 CFA francs, you must answer for your actions. There is a trial that is currently underway. You should answer in front of the judges. This is unprecedented. A minister who answers before a small judge. Excuse me, but this is the reality. And today, Captain Traoré would also be ready to go to court if he were also called corrupt. But he is not.[10] Author's translation.

People give similar answers when challenged to reflect on the progress made in fighting the jihadist insurgency.

> Currently, I travel by motorcycle in areas where three years ago, you didn't even dare to venture. There are also schools that were closed, which are currently open. There are some people who had fled these areas, even teachers, even nurses, fled the areas. But life is resuming quietly, slowly, and surely.[11] Author's translation.

Another person added: 'What he's doing in 2–3 years now should have been done for the past 27 years [when Compaore was in power]. But it has just been done in less time'.[12]

The popularity of this discourse with the ordinary people of Ouagadougou can also be seen through social media, where the performance of Traoré is widely relayed. A horde of supporters amplifies his rhetoric on social media, helping to turn it into a mass popular myth. The affective attraction of a mass online audience towards Traoré's performance of crisis has been described as a 'digital cult' by *The Africa Report* magazine. The *Report* claims that: 'Pro-Traoré imagery includes AI-generated scenes, deepfake videos and "divinely lit" portraits

that depict him as a Pan-African hero resisting Western domination'. Social media posts often portray him as a 'beloved world champion', 'Africa's most beloved president right now', or 'the world's youngest leader at 37'. These messages amplify the affective resonance more than the substance of the policies. Nonetheless, these digital circulations reframe his rhetoric as a symbol of Pan-African resistance to imperialism.

This transnational dimension highlights how the performative power of populist rhetoric can animate what Papacharissi (2015) describes as 'affective publics'. This is in reference to the loosely organised communities connected by shared sentiments and digital storytelling, rather than formal party structures or institutional channels. More importantly, this 'affective public' echoes the Pan-African historical imaginaries of figures like Thomas Sankara, the revolutionary Burkinabè leader of the 1980s, whose assassinated legacy still fuels political dreams of genuine independence (Harsch 2013).

Through this transnational digital circulation, Traoré's rhetorical performance becomes more than just a local governance strategy; it transforms into an ideological brand that mobilises protests far from Ouagadougou. Let us go back to demonstrations in London, Paris, Rome and New York in April 2025, mentioned at the beginning of this article, and where crowds of young Africans and diasporic activists marched under slogans like 'Traoré is Africa's Hope' and 'End Neocolonial Occupation'. Undoubtedbly, they reveal how his speech acts are re-appropriated as calls for global solidarity. For many in the diaspora, supporting Traoré becomes an effective gesture that channels frustration with persistent racial inequalities and neocolonial economic structures in the West.

In this sense, the performance of anti-imperialism operates at multiple affective scales. At the national level, it addresses the economic disempowerment perceived across many African communities as the consequence of incomplete decolonisation from Western powers. Especially in French former colonies like Burkina Faso, such domination is perceived through the currency of the CFA franc, the military bases or even cultural symbols such as colonial memorials (Daga 2025). In that sense, the situation in Burkina Faso speaks to similar contexts across francophone Africa where lingering French influence is often associated with foreign exploitation and economic underdevelopment (Daga 2026). Instead, Traoré's performance translates into an empowering narrative that justifies radical security policies and mobilises national resources in defiance of an international order that is challenged for working against the interests of the people of Burkina Faso. Therefore, it is unsurprising that his rhetoric finds a strong echo with a population that has consistently grown disgruntled from decades of unsuccessful French interventions. At the transnational level, the rhetoric fosters a sense of belonging among scattered communities who see in Traoré's defiance the echo of unfinished postcolonial struggles. For this affective public, he represents the living memory of African historical heroes such as Thomas Sankara or Patrice Lumumba, who were assassinated for attempting to break away from an international order perceived as unfair to their countries.

However, the global spread of this performative narrative also reveals the limitations of symbolic politics when confronted with intractable domestic realities. While expelling French forces and adopting new security partnerships with non-Western actors have earned Traoré praise among anti-imperialist supporters, these measures have not halted the advance of jihadist insurgents across large swathes of northern and eastern Burkina Faso (Charbonneau 2021; ICG 2022). An economics professor working at the University of Ouagadougou, whom

I interviewed, cast a doubt on the long-term viability of government expenditure. He blasts the government's major project of building a 4×4 highway between Ouagadougou and Bobo Dioulasso as a political stunt that would not withstand the test of the country's economic viability.[13]

Nonetheless, for many people in Burkina Faso and across the African continent, Traoré is rewriting the rules of an international order that has kept Burkina Faso under foreign tutelage and prevented its people from reaping the benefits of development under the postcolonial state. His populist rhetoric recodes international sovereignty in a vernacular that makes more sense to the ordinary man in Ouagadougou. And for this affective audience, it is clear that since Traoré rose to power, Burkina Faso has been reclaiming its sovereignty. As a man claimed in comparison to the country's previous ruling elite: 'Before, we were ruled by people who were like puppets. These people have been manipulated. Today, we say what we want, we do what we want'.[14]

Conclusion

Since seizing power in 2022, Traoré has become a disruptive figure in the political landscape of West Africa. His political leadership has challenged the regional order as he joined hands with the leaders of Mali and Niger to steer away from ECOWAS, the regional organisation, and established an alternative body known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). He ostensibly ordered the departure of the French troops who had been unsuccessfully fighting a decade-long battle against a jihadist insurgency. It is precisely this unapologetic defiance against the geopolitical order of West Africa that attracted the sympathy of the African diaspora and strong support among the people of Burkina Faso.

The article argues that Traoré's statecraft resides in his ability to stage and to perform a crisis of sovereignty in Burkina Faso. At the heart of his performance, we find a script that divides the geopolitics of Burkina Faso into a triangle made of the righteous people, the corrupt elites and the imperialist forces. In this crisis, the only way for the people to reclaim the lost sovereignty is through a permanent fight against the corrupt elites and the imperialist forces which support them. This dramaturgy of crisis and sovereignty perfectly lends itself to analysis through the lenses of populism as a performance developed by scholars such as Alexander (2004) and Moffitt (2016).

However, Traoré's populist style poses a challenge to a literature that limits the significance of populism to the crisis of the liberal order. Instead, his style suggests looking more seriously at African decolonial imaginaries as the breeding ground for populist rhetoric. The marches of support in Western cities and the strong digital cult seen on social media did not happen in a vacuum. They are reflective of the young African leader's ability to appeal to the affective charges of Pan-Africanism and the wounded sense that decolonisation has yet to be complete.

Ethical approval

I secured oral consent from all the participants in this research. I gave them a summary of the research objectives and how I intended to utilise the data collected. They were allowed to retain their anonymity, and only personal information about age and gender was collected. I anonymised the data to ensure that no personal information could be linked to participants' identities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

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Data availability statement

The author confirms that the article contains no quantitative analysis and that it is not based on clinical tests. Hence, there are no relevant data to make available.

Notes

1. Focus group with craftsmen, Ouagadougou, 20 February 2026.
2. Focus group with artists, Ouagadougou, 6 March 2026.
3. Focus group with artists, Ouagadougou, 6 March 2026.
4. Anonymous interview with trade union leader, Ouagadougou, 10 March 2026.
5. Focus group with informal sector traders, Ouagadougou, 25 February 2026.
6. Focus group with craftsmen, Ouagadougou, 23 February 2026.
7. Focus group with craftsmen, Ouagadougou, 20 February 2026.
8. Focus group with informal sector traders, Ouagadougou, 25 February 2026.
9. Focus group with craftsmen, Ouagadougou, 23 February 2026.
10. Focus group with artists, Ouagadougou, 6 March 2026.
11. Focus group with memorial visitors, Ouagadougou, 9 March 2026.
12. Focus group with memorial visitors, Ouagadougou, 9 March 2026.
13. Anonymous interview with an academic, Ouagadougou, 11 March 2026.
14. Focus group with artists, Ouagadougou, 6 March 2026.

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