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Switzerland's Relations with South Africa's Apartheid Regime in Swiss Public Policy Communications between 1948 and 2001

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This project studies the importance of Swiss-South African relations in Swiss public policy communications between 1948 and 2001. It is based on analysis of the news-media arena, the parliamentary arena, and selected administrative sources from federal departments. Use of this dual arena analysis and official documents has enabled a systematic survey of content and response to positions taken by official representatives, critics, and defenders of Swiss-South African relations. The study also analyses interaction between the news media and the parliamentary arena.

This study focused on the following issues:

- In which key communication events did relations between Switzerland and South Africa become the issue and to what degree of intensity?

- To which actors could these key communication events be traced and which ones gained prominence as a result?

- Which patterns of interpretation and arguments characterized the debate on Swiss-South African relations?

- Within which contexts is this discussion imbedded, and how was the course of these contexts determined?

- How did coverage of Swiss-South African relations in the news media influence the parliamentary arena and vice versa?

- Did differences arise between the executive and legislative branches in interpreting Swiss-South African relations?

- How should relations between Switzerland and South Africa ultimately be understood from a communications- and conflict-theory perspective?

The following research project findings can be determined in regard to these issues:

Since institutionalisation of Apartheid in South Africa in 1948, this policy and Swiss-South African relations gained prominent play in news media political coverage and in Parliament before-

hand in connections with key communication events resulting from the repressive military, police-enforcement, and martial-law policies of the South African government. Before the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, which represented the first of these key communication events, relations between Switzerland and South Africa were not a topic in either the news media or the parliamentary arena. Swiss foreign policy coverage during the 1950s was almost completely typified by coverage on Cold War "hot spots". Since South Africa had not yet been viewed as a Cold War hot spot, coverage of events in the Apartheid state was accordingly sparse. South Africa gained attention – especially in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ) – as a potential site for capital investment. Typical of the financial coverage of the times, these articles are still apolitical in their assessments.

Only the "Sharpeville massacre" communications event in 1960 shifted attention on South Africa and Swiss-South African relations, so that Switzerland's political actors were led to take positions. Two opposing interpretative patterns took form in the debate and would last into the late 1980s. Advocates of the Social Democratic Party and the Labour Party (the PdA, later the "New Left" movement) viewed Apartheid as incapable of reform. Thus emerged a call to oust the Apartheid regime and sever relations with it. By contrast, bourgeois parties – as expressed in sporadic reflections on Swiss investments in South Africa already during the 1950s – stressed the possibility and even the necessity of "evolutionary change" in South African society. This had to be supported through economic and diplomatic contacts. From this perspective, Apartheid ought to be viewed as an adequate process of modernity and civilisation specific to the development status of the "native" population.

In the context of the Cold War – intensified because of the Berlin and Cuban crises as well as the decolonizing process in Africa and South Asia – the semantics of this interpretive pattern defending South Africa as an endangered free bastion of the West (domino theory) was added. In this process the domino theory complemented the modernisation theory to justify Swiss-South African relations. Critics of the Apartheid regime and Swiss-South African relations were accused of subjecting South Africa to an ideologically motivated «special treatment», since violations of human rights in other states – particularly those within the "East Bloc" sphere of influence – were not attacked with the same vehemence.

The fact that the debate over Swiss-South African relations only peaked in the news media and parliamentary arena in 1963 (due to arms shipments from the Swiss firm «Oerlikon-Bührle») was essentially explained by Switzerland's changed perception of danger. After the Cuba crisis, the Cold War's threat scenarios lost their plausibility. To the extent that Switzerland's national defence and the Swiss armaments industry could be subjected to debate by erosion of the Cold War legitimacy pattern on the left wing of the political spectrum (its initiative to ban atomic weapons and the Mirage scandal), social democratic and liberal politicians could join the stigmatised representatives of the PdA in Parliament and the news media in criticizing arms exports to South Africa as a scandal based on crass profit motives. The argument for evolutionary change in South Africa represented by the bourgeois parties was criticized as elevating Apartheid to an «indescribable euphemism». The perception of South Africa was confronted sharply as a racist nation with policies reminiscent of Hitler's. Bourgeois policy – linked to the interpretative pattern of the class struggle – was explained by the influence of the business lobby defending its South African interests.

As a reaction to the national and international criticism of «Oerlikon-Bührle» arms shipments to South Africa, the Federal Council decided in December 1963 to declare an arms embargo. During the following decades this decision became the cornerstone of the core argument with which representatives of the executive branch and administration as well as the bourgeois parties reacted

to criticism of Swiss-South African relations. Although Switzerland was not a member of the international organisations demanding boycott measures, it played a pioneer role in this issue by introducing specific measures against the Apartheid regime through its arms embargo of 1963 long before the UN's mandatory arms embargo (1977).

Other key communications events were the Soweto upheaval (1976) and the sharpening of international sanctions against South Africa (1985 and 1986) within the context of calling for the right to declare war, first in parts of South Africa, then in the country as a whole. The second half of the 1980s became the most intensive phase of focusing on Swiss-South African relations. The sanctions decisions of the United States and the European Community against South Africa as well as related demands by the UN Security Council in 1985 and 1986 led to international isolation of the Apartheid regime. This isolation increased the need for legitimacy in Swiss-South African relations and gave the Anti-Apartheid movements added acceptance.

Even more than during the late 1970s, initiatives and other moves from social groupings critical of Apartheid now typified public communication in the news media and in Parliament. Criticism during the 1970s concentrated on Swiss business' South African relations that affected the armaments industry (circumvention deals) and wholesalers (Granny Smith apples' campaign). Now it zeroed in on major Swiss banks (bank boycott campaign). "Apartheid gold" replaced Granny Smith apples as the symbol of morally condemned business ties.

When Apartheid ended in South Africa the issue of Swiss-South African relations during the Apartheid era at first failed to stir up a reaction in public policy communications. However, Switzerland's "microfiche scandal" at the same time marked the beginning of a series of highly resonating debates. These can be typified as politicizing the past and placing the present within an historic setting. The microfiche debate preceded debate on the "shadows of World War II". Thus these factors formed the topical framework in which Swiss-South African relations were revived in intense discussions from 1998 on.

If we consider the actors who wanted to put Swiss-South African relations on the news media and parliamentary agendas, the following development becomes apparent. There were prominent and established political parties during the 1970s – particularly in the field of foreign policy – that made an issue of Swiss-South African relations. During the 1970s social movements that specialized in the topic of Swiss-South African relations dealt with it primarily. They tried to stir up debate on this issue and to leave their imprint on it through campaigns making use of the news media and later campaigns in Parliament as well. During the second half of the 1990s the news media also appeared increasingly as an actor in its own right with clear anti-Apartheid positions that viewed Swiss-South Africa relations as a scandal in retrospect. The moral tone of the media message during the course of the newly changing nature of public relations (i.e., the news media's show of independence from the political system and its orientation toward the market logic of the economic system) led to the news profession itself to substitute editorial positions and becoming an event manager of social movements.

The updated pattern of interpretations and arguments indicated a high continuity in the public policy discussion on Swiss-South African relations. Debates on Switzerland's relations with the South African Apartheid regime since the 1960s had been characterized by marked polarization between left and right. The rigid dichotomy of positions regarding South Africa and Swiss-South African relations had already reached a highly ideological character in the early 1960s, because it stressed the age-old political identity of the actors involved: Anyone who defended maintaining Swiss-South African relations, interpreted Apartheid as an adequate form of the modernization process, and upheld the domino theory belonged with the bourgeois camp. Inversely, criticism of

the Apartheid regime and Swiss-South African relations was an indicative sign of leftist political orientation. Hence most arguments also proved to be astoundingly long lived.

This showed up in an exemplary manner when judging Apartheid. While critics of Apartheid had assumed from the early 1960s at latest that the Apartheid regime was incapable of reform, the system's important Swiss defenders during the entire Apartheid era were convinced of the fundamental possibility and even necessity of evolutionary change. The commitment of Swiss enterprises was judged accordingly. While the critics viewed it ultimately as immoral behaviour oriented toward maximizing profits, the defenders sought to justify business community's commitment as a contribution to peaceful change in South African society.

Obviously this polarity became sharper as impressively large and growing business interests led the defenders to support intensive Swiss-South African relations. This bonding of vested interests and apologists represented the defenders' central moral shortcoming. From their standpoint, managing this deficit argumentatively led the South African regime's defenders raising doubts about the moral and political integrity of Apartheid's critics. In addition to debates over the war in Vietnam and Cambodia, this moral polarity in regard to South Africa and Swiss-South African relations amounted to the most reliable characteristic of left-right polarization during the late 1960s and early 1970s: Hardly any other political differences so clearly polarized the partisan "camps".

In world-view terms, the basic anti-communist consensus – the Cold War – shaped the central context for defining the issues and interpreting Swiss-South African relations. Its supplement by the "new" social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the course of establishing North-South dualism led to the South Africa issue, private business' engagement in this regard, and related Swiss foreign policy becoming subjects of controversy. This controversy became sharper at the outset of the 1970s. During the second half of the 1980s, martial law and the international isolation of South Africa formed the reference framework for Swiss discussions.

After the end of East-West bipolarity, Swiss-South African relations were pushed into debates on coming to terms with the past, beginning with the "microfiche state" dispute. The news media strongly characterized the inner dynamics of these clashes. They now assumed the social movements' role in identifying "scandals", using finger-pointing and morally loaded descriptive tactics. Thus news coverage cultivated topics high in conflict and accordingly «newsworthy» in terms of reappraising the past. The established political actors now appear increasingly more reactive in contrast to the dynamics of the communications media during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

In retrospect, the intransigence of those positioned on the left and right wings was particularly striking. The South Africa issue was a component of a reliable political orientation and labelling of both «bourgeois» and «leftist» politics. This strict polarization by identity labels made Switzerland incapable of learning in regard to its relations with South Africa. Unlike almost all other centre nations, it could not even learn once others distanced themselves from the Apartheid regime (even if to varying degrees) at latest after UN resolutions. The South Africa issue was indeed an element of political debate in public communication within both the parliamentary and news-media arenas. Yet it was not a discourse in which positions could be mutually influenced. It is noteworthy, given the background of "consensus democracy " practiced in Swiss politics, that political actors empathize and compromise in domestic politics and thus assist the learning curve on aggregate.

Ironically this phenomenon can be explained precisely because of that situation. Foreign policy – and thus the issue of relations with South Africa as well – gained an identity-labelling function in the home policy debate domesticated through negotiating procedures required by consensus de-

mocracy. Political actors were able to mark out their domestic policy differences precisely in reference to this foreign-policy issue. Learning handicaps were compounded by polarization on another central foreign-policy issue: Switzerland's entry into the UN, which was submitted to a vote in 1986. This debate raged with extraordinary force over neutral Switzerland losing sovereignty. In this context, adequate attention to UN resolutions on South Africa did not seem politically expedient.

In short: the ability to compromise on domestic policy issues had its flip side: resulting foreign-policy polarization that also tilted the debate on UN entry to discussions on Swiss-South African relations just when the UN approved important resolutions on South Africa. Owing to the polarization as well as political opportunities concerning the relationship of Switzerland to the UN, Parliament was blocked in its exercised its monitoring and guidance function in regard to the economy, the executive branch, and its administration. The parliamentary debates following the UN resolutions of 1986 and 1988 showed this clearly. Parliament could not fulfil its seismographic function. The strict ideological polarization allowed it to reject criticism of Swiss-South African relations (through mere political labelling). This was true even when practically all Western democracies recognized that the days of the Apartheid regime were numbered due to extensive loss of legitimacy at home and abroad.