Anhang Thomas Widmer, Christian Hirschi
With the cooperation of Cornelia Blaser, Markus Marti, Dominic Senn

Stabilität im Wandel.
Gestaltung der schweizerischen Südafrikapolitik von 1968 bis 1994
[Stability in change. Creating Swiss policies towards South Africa from 1968 to 1994]
Zürich/Chur, Verlag Rüegger, 2005
Zürcher Beiträge zur Politikwissenschaft, Band 23 [Zurich contributions to political science, volume 23]
280 pages, 44 Swiss franks

Comment
Peter Leuenberger

T.Widmer/C.Hirschi's study*, which is a component of the Swiss National Science Foundation's programme 42+, "Relations between Switzerland and South Africa" (NFP 42+), addresses the formulation of policies vis-à-vis South Africa in the Swiss political system in the period 1968-1994. The authors apply an analytical approach and focus on official statements of the Swiss federal council (the government) concerning South African policy. They add a comparison with the sanctions issue in the case of Iraq in 1990 to the case studies, which address specific positions taken in various phases.

Which factors determined the remarkable consistency of the Swiss position vis-à-vis the Apartheid regime? And why did the Swiss position increasingly also differ from that taken by other Western countries (USA, EC)? The authors limit their analysis to the political sub-system of relations between Switzerland and South Africa, which is made up of the government, parliament, political parties and interest groups. This sub-system's economic aspects only appear as marginal conditions. The concept of an "advocacy coalition framework" (ACF) is the focal point. This relates to the two coalitions confronting each other in the field of the formulation of Swiss policies vis-à-vis South Africa. The contrast between the two blocks crystallises primarily on the issue of sanctions.

Readers who are not familiar with the concepts and analytical methods of political science will not find the study very accessible. It does make it easier, however, to be aware of how isolated Switzerland was concerning the human rights discourse after the Second World War, which was conducted in the context of the UN. This discourse was closely connected to the decolonisation process, and the Apartheid issue had been one of the central focuses since the beginning of the 1960s. Switzerland only acceded to the UN human rights conventions in the 1990s, after Apartheid had been abolished. The fact that Switzerland was isolated was probably also related to a domestic democracy deficit arising out of the non-existent women's suffrage. The Swiss political system always dealt with important questions on the international agenda as a laggard, due to its chosen intellectual isolation.

The first case study deals with the "moral condemnation" of Apartheid by Switzerland at the UN human rights conference in Tehran in 1968. Up to this point the federal council had obviously avoided any substantial statement on the Apartheid regime. Up until then, Switzerland had never taken an international position on human rights issues. The federal council was afraid that the Tehran conference, and thus the UN, could interfere in the field of international law, which was the ICRC's field. Switzerland's participation seemed an appropriate way of preventing this. But it became increasingly clear that Apartheid was going to be one of the conference's main issues. The federal council let the foreign affairs ministry (the Eidgenössisches Politisches Departement EPD, as it was called at the time) formulate the contents of the statement. The head of the Swiss delegation, ambassador Lindt, made a declaration at the conference which condemned Apartheid as a permanent violation of the universal declaration of human rights. The Apartheid system was also said to contradict Switzerland's democratic and humanitarian tradition. As a non-member of the UN, however, Switzerland would not voice its opinion on political measures which may be taken in the framework of the UN. Switzerland was already dissociating itself from any potential forced measures aimed at solving the problem.

This first substantial statement by Switzerland on Apartheid met with little domestic political response. It was not made clear to the public whether the federal council really stood by the declaration, or whether ambassador Lindt had gone so far purely on his own initiative. South African ambassador Pakendorf intervened with the ministry of foreign affairs in Bern as a result. The ministry informed him that the delegation's speech in Tehran had merely been formulated on the basis of general instructions from the federal council. On the basis of this indecisive information Pakendorf was able to assume that ambassador Lindt had prepared the speech alone and did not enjoy any genuine support in the federal council. So he took the opportunity of implying that ambassador Lindt was beholden to Moscow. "The Swiss delegate, who is otherwise accredited in Moscow, obviously (believed) that he had to seize this opportunity of intervening in Tehran, to kindle his host country's government's approval, which, as is well-known, attacks the South African system most vehemently, even if it does not appear to be legitimised to do so in the light of numerous cases of human rights violations in its own country" (page 87). It is true, though that the federal council was seen to be weak. The "moral" condemnation of Apartheid was not a part of the federal council's resolution at the Tehran conference. The final content of the declaration was only formulated in consultation with the head of the ministry of foreign affairs, federal councillor Willy Spühler. Its contents came about thanks mainly to ambassador Lindt, an experienced and far-sighted diplomat.

It had been practically unavoidable since the end of the 1960s that Switzerland condemn Apartheid in principle, even if it was not completely convincing. The condemnation could be repeated at every opportunity until the end of the Apartheid era, for example at the world conference against Apartheid in Lagos in 1977.

The federal council's statements against sanctions turned out to be substantially clearer, in contrast, from the mid-1980s onwards. The council felt obliged to make a clear statement against imposing economic sanctions on South Africa, both as a result of other states' decisions (the USA, the EC and Commonwealth states), and of the United Nations security council's call to take economic measures against South Africa. It said that economic sanctions were not practical, and that Switzerland adhered to the universality of economic relations. Besides the two core elements of its South African policy, namely the moral condemnation of Apartheid and the rejection of economic sanctions, Switzerland started, as a result of international sanctions, to make adjustments to the new situation from 1986 onwards, such as monitoring the flow of trade and dialogue with parties to the conflict in South Africa, as well as launching a programme of "positive measures" to support the black majority of the population.

The federal council adhered to its basic position concerning sanctions right through to the transition period of 1992-93, and this led to Switzerland's increasing international isolation. It authorised the sale of 60 Pilatus PC-7 aircraft to South Africa, despite the UN sanctions committee's call to refrain from making this sale until international sanctions were revoked.

The Swiss Anti-Apartheid Movement, which consisted of the political left and progressive church circles, did not succeed in softening up the establishment block on the sanctions issue. This block consisted of the federal council, the federal authorities, the parliamentary majority, trade and industry associations and companies. At least it initiated numerous parliamentary questions which forced the federal council to take a clear position several times. It managed to launch a public debate, the after-effects of which can still be felt today. One of these results, and not the least significant one, was the launching of the research programme NFP 42+. The Swiss establishment was unanimous in rejecting the demand that Switzerland exert pressure on South Africa through economic sanctions. The study does not provide an adequate explanation as to why the Swiss polity supported the Apartheid regime so doggedly and for so long, even at the price of increasing international isolation. The explanations based on an analysis of the political system alone fall short of an explanation. A systematic analysis of the economic interests and relations would provide more insight. The study was not handicapped by the closing of access to trade and industry files, for the authors decided in advance to forego analysis of this field. That is why the study's political relevance remains rather limited.

A comparison with the case of the Iraq sanctions of 1990 is illuminating, as these contrasted and overlapped the question concerning sanctions against South Africa. Participation in the sanctions

against Iraq (and subsequently in those against Libya, Serbia, amongst others) was justified primarily by the Swiss interest in joining and acting in solidarity with the entire community of states in sanctioning a law breaker. Similar arguments could have been used to impose sanctions against South Africa, as Nelson Mandela had called for during his visit to Switzerland a few months previously. It was just that in the Iraq/Kuwait case, less long-term and significant export and investors' interests were certainly involved than in the South African case. Terminating business relations with the Apartheid regime would have meant foregoing economic advantages. The damage to its political image that Switzerland accepted on account of its differences with western countries on the Apartheid and sanctions issue was obviously considered the lesser evil by the Swiss system's elite.

Peter Leuenberger, member of the committee of the Swiss Apartheid Debt and Reparations Campaign (KEESA/ADR)