

Notes on

Pretoria's "Eloff Commission" investigating the South African Council of Churches with special reference to the participation of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) in the hearings (March 1983) and the relationship EKD-SACC

---

1. The establishment of the Eloff Commission

The "Commission of Inquiry into the South African Council of Churches", named in brief after its chairman Justice C.F. Eloff, was established by the South African government in October 1981.

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) has been under attack by the ruling powers in South Africa (white church included) for many years, particularly so since its very vocal present general secretary, the Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu, came into office in 1977.

Two attacks came in May 1980: a) Botha accused the SACC of spending funds on activities instigating unrest in the country (e.g. school boycott in the Cape) and on ANC projects. b) A then SACC executive staff stated in the press that huge amounts had been spent by the SACC which could not be accounted for. In September 1981, police minister Le Grange attacked SACC again in Parliament.

Meanwhile, in 1980 the SACC had ordered an extra audit of its accounts for the previous two years which produced a clean bill. In 1981 the SACC executive established again an internal commission to investigate its administration. Before this commission could begin to work Botha announced the establishment of the Eloff Commission on the grounds that an SACC investigation by government was "in the interest of the public".

Hearings began on September 1st, 1982. Security chief Johan Coetzee recommended in February 1983 that SACC be made an "affected organization". It was clear from the outset that Pretoria did not simply want to screen SACC's bookkeeping, but intended a major onslaught on the entire Council and its work. Thus the SACC Justice and Reconciliation Department, which does not deal with funds, came under particular review in the process.

Pretoria had the audacity to approach the World Council of Churches in June 1982 asking for an expertise on SACC's standing and credibility in the theological world and requesting detailed information on all money transfers as well as access by an official of the Eloff Commission to the WCC's archives in Geneva. The WCC responded in September 1982 with a short theological memorandum, turning down the other requests with the deliberate statement that the Swiss Penal Code forbids them "to provide such information to a public or private foreign organization".

SACC issued a request to churches and church agencies in various countries to act as witnesses in the hearings. In March 1983, church representatives from the USA, Denmark, Great Britain, Australia, the Netherlands and the FRG appeared before the Commission in Pretoria. The EKD sent a three-man delegation: Bishop Dr. Martin Kruse, member of the Council of the EKD and chairman of the Evangelical Commission on Southern Africa in the FRG; President Dr. Heinz Joachim Held of the EKD's Foreign Relations Department; the Rev. Warner Conring of the EKD Head Office in Hannover (responsible for financial contributions to SACC). Their statements before the Eloff Commission are here attached (as far as they are available in English through SACC's "Ecunews" No. 3, March 1983. EKD: Kruse and Conring). All three EKD statements (Kruse, Held, Conring) were published in the FRG in German (epd-Dokumentation No. 15, 11th April 1983).



The installation of the Eloff Commission caused considerable stir in the FRG, both with friends and foes of the SACC. Right-wing church circles attacked the EKD fiercely because of its continued support of SACC and Bishop Tutu, and still do so. SACC executives, on the other hand, have pointed out that, while the Eloff Commission investigations indeed paralyzed ongoing work of the SACC, one should not attach too much importance to the entire affair and think that the world had come to a standstill.

2. Comment on the issue of SACC's administration

The internal finance administration of SACC has been indeed in a certain state of disarray for some time. This has to do with the volume of SACC operations (see also next paragraph) and the lack of sufficiently trained staff. Some irregularities by staff were also discovered. The disarray was inherited by general secretary Bishop Tutu from his predecessor John Rees, who enjoyed particular esteem and confidence in EKD circles (notably from Rev. Conring). A court case against Rees (since 1976/77 director of the South African Institute of Race Relations) conducted independently from the Eloff investigations in 1982/83 about suspected major fraud of SACC funds and his conviction in May 1983 does not seem to have altered this very much.

Since Bishop Tutu and the SACC executive made sincere attempts to get the overall finance administration back to order (only in the case of the Rees accusations they showed strange hesitance to bring it into the open even on the church level - which leaves room for various interpretations, including fear of Rees), the matter of the disarray could have well been settled church-internally without Pretoria's 'assistance', which would be the normal procedure in the case of a church/private institution anyway.

3. Comment on the relationship EKD-SACC

The EKD and related agencies support national church councils all over the world; this is normal international church practice. (In addition, and aside from SACC channels, the EKD supports heavily white German congregations in SA and Namibia as well as other institutions). However, there is no other single national council of churches that receives such huge amounts of money annually from the EKD than is the case with SACC (Eloff says SACC disposed in the 7 years 1975-81 of Rand 17,95 million, half of which came from the EKD. This should be correct). The issue why the EKD allocates so much ever since the Rees era, assisting thus to blow up the SACC to a huge and difficult to manage organization and also in view of the general 'impact' aspect from outside is not being discussed in the EKD. Critical observers feel that this is a deliberate strategy to 'buy' the church leadership in SA.

It must be pointed out that although the EKD will defend the SACC to the outside world they are by no means happy about everything the SACC, particularly Bishop Tutu, pronounces, be it on investments, civil disobedience, comparison of apartheid with the Nazi regime or similar issues like Tutu's latest public praise for WCC's Programme to Combat Racism and Special Fund. Observers feel that should anything happen to SACC and its general secretary, the EKD will drop him like a hot potato and establish some other 'partner relationships' in SA of a more convenient kind.

A thought that the SACC, even in the situation in SA, might still not do enough for liberation, is unthinkable in the EKD. Besides, the EKD does not think of liberation, but in terms of reform.



As far as the tackling of issues is concerned, the EKD has pursued with SA/the SACC in a marked way its general attitude adopted on all international concerns: not the EKD forms an opinion and takes a stand in its own public - the ball is thrown into the court of the other party, the suffering and oppressed who cannot speak openly in their own country. After weak attempts of the EKD to talk to West-German firms investing in SA failed, the EKD requested SACC to talk to German subsidiaries in SA (1975); when the World Council of Churches appealed to Western churches to study and act on the investment issue, the EKD requested the SACC to produce a study (1977) and of the little the SACC was able to say publicly the EKD twisted some of the points to their own convenience in a "responding statement"; when the EKD had the idea of setting up a "Dialogue Group on Southern Africa" with SACC participation and was specifically requested by the SACC to study the Western ideologies that account for supporting the oppressive regime in SA, the EKD looked into the 'ideologies' of South Africans by inviting liberation movements for talks (1980). The list could be continued, also with examples on other countries and issues.

The EKD, unlike some of the churches in other Western countries, never makes itself and West-German society the subject of reflection and action; it always looks for deviations and substituting activities.

In spite of some disappointments about the EKD voiced by the SACC, it is as yet unclear whether the SACC leadership has begun to realize that they are the subject and tool of a strategy employed in the EKD executive quarters.

encl.

Excerpts of Ecunews", SACC, March 1983

August 1983