

# Lost opportunities

**I**t is unusual for ministers of trade and industry to make arguments in favour of sanctions. The tenor of Alec Erwin's piece ("Government is not an NGO", *SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 22 No 3, June 1998) is therefore unsurprising.

While the minister acknowledges the role that trade and investment sanctions played in the downfall of apartheid, he nevertheless constructs arguments as to why South Africa should not engage in similar tactics in relation to regimes such as Suharto's Indonesia.

Erwin's can be summarised as follows:

- unilateralism is ineffectual;
- short-term economic strategies are unsustainable;
- we need Indonesian trade for strategic as well as commercial reasons;
- we need a rules-based international trading system;
- support for human rights should emanate from NGOs, not governments.

It is true that a unilateral response would be somewhat futile. South Africa could, and should, however, have provided moral leadership, initially in Africa, and subsequently elsewhere, to mobilise support against systematic violators of human rights. Regrettably, our current foreign policy places little value on using our domestic honouring of human rights values to build a human rights culture globally. We could have provided the kind of leadership that Canada has provided on

*by David Fig*

the question of landmines. It is not so much unilateralism, as initiating strong global alliances. We have squandered such opportunities so badly that they are no longer recognised as having any importance, even amongst key cabinet members.

Short-term strategies are, indeed, often ineffectual. It took many years to mobilise trade sanctions against apartheid, and even these were not universally effective. In the case of Southern Rhodesia, it may be argued that sanctions contributed strongly to Smith's final downfall.

Trade sanctions are not an ideal form of pressure, and often punish the vulnerable (in Iraq, for example). Nevertheless, they are a strong indicator of disapproval, short of violent intervention. They make life more difficult for the affected regimes.

## Trade

Do we need Indonesian trade so badly? Erwin argues that it is a key roleplayer within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and one of the South's strongest economies. Instead, we could have built alliances with other ASEAN members, as we are doing with Malaysia, and still need to do with Vietnam and Thailand. His assessment of the strength of

the Indonesian economy has been proven erroneous. Food shortages are currently so acute, that President Habibie has called for citizens to fast for two days a week.

*(Business Day, 8/7/98)*

We certainly need a rules-based trading system, but that depends on the rules. Currently we are locked into WTO agreements which privilege the Northern, industrial economies and which factor out environmental and human rights issues. We have seen how the obsession with patents impacts upon economic mass health delivery in South Africa. India has also seen how the WTO rules will protect the US patenters of commodities such as turmeric and basmati rice, indigenous products which have been known to Indian cultivators for thousands of years. By all means, let us have rules, but let us not understand the WTO system as neutral or apolitical.

If reports emanating from WTO-watchers in Geneva are correct, Erwin, the current president of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), is also a potential candidate for the director-generalship of the WTO which falls vacant next April. (Chakravarthi Raghavan, "WTO to start process for choosing successor to Ruggiero", Geneva, 6 June 1998.) This may account for the cautiousness and pragmatism of his views, given that he would have to earn widespread Northern support for his candidacy to succeed.

### Reaching out

We are fortunate in that both our own, and Indonesian, NGOs have bravely spoken out against human rights violations and evil regimes. But it cannot stop there. We need to entrench a human rights culture throughout our society. In this, our government should take a lead and not wait for public action to pressure it into taking moral positions consistent with our

domestic political expectations.

What is unclear from Erwin's article are the party-to-party relations with Indonesia, which could be clouding the situation. We need to know what the precise role of Suharto was in the funding of the ANC, for us to understand whether this is a factor in our foreign policy. If so, there needs to be a strong policy distinction made by our government between party and national interests.

Our foreign minister needs to be supported in his attempts to set up a dialogue with Fretelin's Xanana Gusmao, currently a political prisoner in Jakarta's jails. On his last trip to Indonesia in April, Minister Nzo commendably insisted on a personal audience with Gusmao. We look forward to South Africa playing a constructive and assertive role in the settlement of the question of East Timor's sovereignty, as demanded by the equally rules-based UN system.

On a number of occasions since 1994, there has been public debate about the place of human rights values in our foreign policy. Yet pragmatism of a narrow commercial nature continues to rule this out, whether in relation to arms sales to Algeria, or our distasteful honouring of Suharto. We need to move to a foreign policy in which it becomes more pragmatic to support global peace and human rights. Our stance on landmines, on non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and on the comprehensive banning of nuclear tests should be paving the way.

If we hope to host the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Durban effectively, we cannot afford to have our foreign policy shackled to an amoral commercial policy. ★

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