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How Finland became involved in the liberation struggles of Southern Africa / Pekka Peltola

Most African countries became independent in the 1960s. These new members of the UN started to change the approach of the world organisation from East-West to North-South. Questions related to colonialism, self-determination and apartheid rose to the agenda and got far more attention than ever before. The UN became soon of central importance in development of Southern Africa, which was a especially problematic case. Portugal and Britain still retained colonies there and South Africa strengthened its power over blacks through the ideology and laws of apartheid. For many African countries Southern African liberation from colonialism became an important aim. The all-African organisations, notably the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which were established by independent countries, took it as their duty to assist liberation movements.

In South Africa, African National Congress took a new and radical course under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. In Namibia, liberation movements OPO/SWAPO and SWANU were born, and their exiled leaders found support in independent African countries. In 1960, Sam Nujoma left Namibia for Tanzania to spend almost three decades abroad. He was soon followed by a score of comrades who now serve the government of independent Namibia. FRELIMO found its first leader already abroad, when Eduardo Mondlane accepted the leadership. In an extremely small and poor African country a leader of exceptional qualities became internationally known. Amilcar Cabral was able to organise peasants divided along their different cultures behind one liberation movement, the PAIG.

Colonialists fought back. In 1965, the white minority of Southern Rhodesia declared the country independent under their minority rule. The United Nations called for economic sanctions and placed an international embargo on Southern Rhodesia. Countries which suffered from the consequences (e.g. Zambia) were assisted. Finland complied with UN decisions and passed a proper law. Many countries broke, however, the embargo and it took 15 years before Zimbabwe was born and majority rule in the country was established. To start with, Finland had no role in this development. The country had almost no trade and very few other interests in Sub-Saharan Africa, except in

South Africa. There were few hopes that in a foreseeable future material interests would become much larger elsewhere than in RSA. Therefore, it is quite clear that the motives behind the policies of Finland could be influenced by other than economic considerations.

As a member of the United Nations Finland felt compelled to participate in assisting newly independent countries in Africa and to take part in financing some programmes to support the people still under foreign rule. This was due to the UN Charter which recognised the self-determination of all nations. In 1961, a special committee was set up to assess the needs of development aid. This resulted in the establishment of a development aid office in the Foreign Ministry. Finland followed the other Nordic countries and joined a Nordic development programme in Tanzania. Thus the international obligations had led the official Finland to open the way to activities which were not yet discussed or adopted by the public opinion.

Finland's foreign policy concentrated between 1955 and 1965 in securing in the west a recognition of Finnish policy of neutrality. Priority had Finland's relation with Soviet Union and the need to balance it. The governments considered secondary and wanted those to support the primary objectives.

Bridge-building and peace-strengthening activities over the two power blocks were initiated around 1965. President Urho Kekkonen considered that Finland should be around when decisions on our fate are made. Finland's foreign policy became active. With it arose the conflict between morals and pure national interests.

Finland matures internationally

The detente after crises over Berlin and Cuba prevailed allowing freedom of movement in the fringes of world politics in the later 1960's. Finland had virtually no relations outside Europe or North America. The only embassy in Africa was located in South Africa since 1949. Contacts were through trade. Another important link had been formed, however, through Finnish missionaries who had arrived to northern part of South-West Africa already in 1870. Their work had slowly began to borne fruit. After almost a hundred years Evangelical Lutheran Ovambokavango Church (ELOK) was a strong organisation in the most populous part of the present Namibia. More than half of the population there belonged to ELOK. As a result of conscious efforts, the leadership of the ELOK was in the process of moving completely into the hands of Ovambos, the people of Northern

Namibia. Turning point may be said to have happened in 1960, when Leonard Auala became the first black leader of the church.

Still, many Finnish missionaries had grave doubts about supporting SWAPO. Only the most farsighted churchmen began to act. In 1961, when the chairman of the missionary society, later archbishop, Mikko Juva, pleaded missionaries to understand growing liberation movement. He did not get much of a support. In the late 1950`s, even Auala was scared of his talk about an independent Namibia some day.

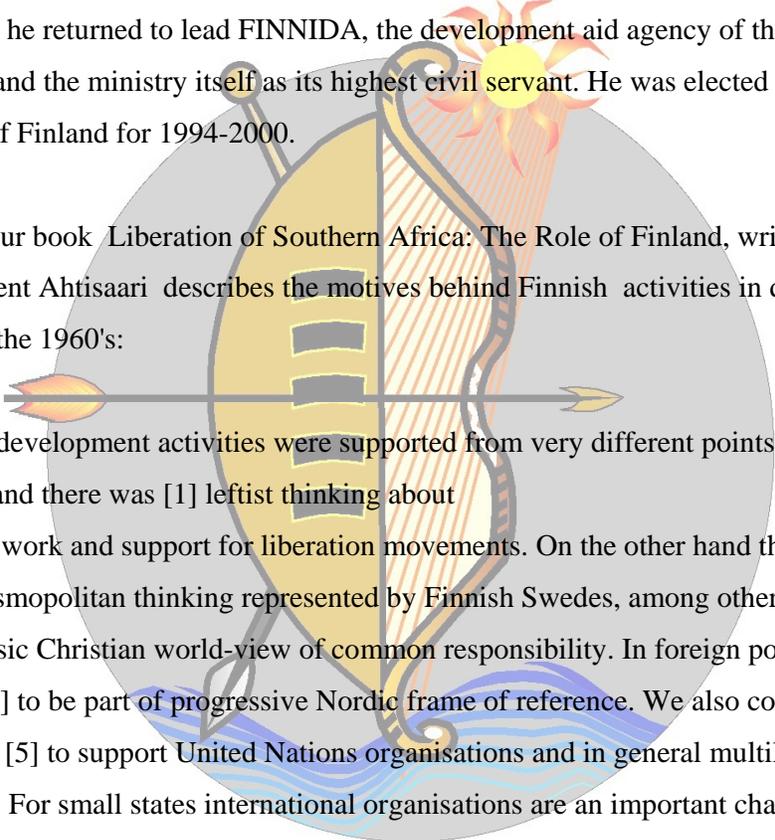
Missionaries did not take any direction from the government of Finland, rather to the contrary, but in an indirect way their influence definitively shaped the attitudes of Finnish authorities in the Namibia question then and later. For ordinary Finns, the 1960's was a time for maturing internationally.

Nothing much was done, but world developments had their effect, especially to the young and educated Finns. Peace organisations flourished, new magazines and pamphlets were published. Finnish office of World University Service (YKA) was an important path-breaker. Prominent ones were the Committee of 100, Peace Committee of Finland (an affiliate of the World Peace Council), Tricont , Students UN Association, the Student Union of Finland. Study groups consolidated wider interest towards the Third World. Activities were dominated by leftist values. Soon the youth organisations on the political right, too, adopted the goals of solidarity towards the struggling poor in the Third World. A few foreign students had a considerable influence in this atmosphere. For instance Nickey Iyambo, now a long time Minister in the government of Namibia, was a scholarship holder of YKA in Finland. In 1966 the first anti-apartheid organisation - South Africa Committee - was founded by students, supported by Seamen's Union's legendary leader Niilo Wälläri, and by the Lutheran Church. Wälläri imposed a blockade on South African wines and spirits on the strength of his union. This blockade, or the organisation, did not live long, but showed where was the basis of action. Official Finland's policy towards South Africa was thought to rest on the general idea of president Urho Kekkonen: "Rather than as judges we see ourselves here as physicians" This was interpreted as demanding inaction towards apartheid, if there was no unanimity among big western powers in the question of sanctioning apartheid.

Our man in the Third World

Martti Ahtisaari, began his career as a development co-operation worker in Pakistan in the late 1950's, when Finland did not yet have its own aid policy nor a programme. Ahtisaari was sent by Sweden. He then led the first development co-operation office in Finland, run by students, the YKA. Later he went over to Foreign Ministry and served as Finland's ambassador to Tanzania between 1973-76. This was the time when Dar Es Salaam was a focal point of African liberation movements. It was natural to communicate with their representatives working in Dar. Ahtisaari accumulated confidence among them. Thus he was propelled by SWAPO to serve as Commissioner of Namibia after Sean McBride in 1977 and soon also as the Special Representative of the General Secretary of UN for Namibia in 1978. From the post of Under Secretary General of UN in New York he returned to lead FINNIDA, the development aid agency of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the ministry itself as its highest civil servant. He was elected as the President of the Republic of Finland for 1994-2000.

Interviewed for our book *Liberation of Southern Africa: The Role of Finland*, written together with Ina Soiri, President Ahtisaari describes the motives behind Finnish activities in developing countries during the 1960's:



"Starting development activities were supported from very different points of departure. On the one hand there was [1] leftist thinking about solidarity work and support for liberation movements. On the other hand there was [2] liberal cosmopolitan thinking represented by Finnish Swedes, among others. There was also [3] the basic Christian world-view of common responsibility. In foreign politics Finland wanted [4] to be part of progressive Nordic frame of reference. We also considered important [5] to support United Nations organisations and in general multilateral co-operation. For small states international organisations are an important channel for getting their voices heard. And behind all this there were also [6] commercial interests supporting internationalisation of Finnish industry. together, all these motives supported the start of development aid.

In our interview president Ahtisaari further discussed the relative weight of these motives:

"I would say that perhaps the three or first four are by far the most important ones. The interest of the political and particularly the youth movements and solidarity groups in Finland. And traditionally the Swedish Peoples' Party or the Swedish speakers had lot of

interest - perhaps for development co-operation more than actually in assisting the liberation movement - but there was absolutely no opposition from that side. And then basically the Missionary Society and I will say active members within the missionary society and I will say again, particularly those who had direct involvement either in Tanzania or in Namibia having been in direct contact with the members of the liberation movements...I think Nordic frame of reference was helpful...it gave the opportunity for those who argued in favour because there was a lot of opposition here as well in entering into a too close relationship with the liberation movements...I would say that the other arguments were less important... they hardly played any role...except in South Africa and to some extent in Namibia because potentially Namibia was supposed to be rich."

It is interesting that Ahtisaari does not mention at all the motive expressed by several other officials of the foreign ministry, a need to balance Soviet influence. Inside of the foreign ministry there was a special need to get Finland identified with Nordic countries. This grew from wish to balance the special relationship with Soviet Union in the eyes of the west.

NGO's demanded governmental action against apartheid, to coincide with the overwhelming majority in the UN General Assembly. As the other Nordic countries already had gone farther into this direction, trailing Stockholm and Oslo offered good arguments. This NGO activity, together with the election victory of the leftist parties in 1966, obviously contributed to policy shifts during coming years, and achieved the primary goal.

Focus on Namibia

After the shock of the indecision by International Court of Justice in the question of South West Africa in 1966 the UN General Assembly ended South African mandate there and set up a UN ad hoc Committee for South West Africa, with Max Jacobsson from Finland as the chairman. The work of the Committee led to the establishment of the Council of Namibia to govern Namibia on behalf of the UN. Prominent participation in the committee signalled an active role for Finland in this particular issue, which grew from year to year.

Finland had generally sought a common stand with the other Nordic countries at the UN, the central place of Finland's activities in African affairs. After 1966, Finland felt that in the question of Namibia it could act on its own, to take the initiative. It is curious, that in the very related question of apartheid - when concerning South Africa - Finland certainly lagged behind and was

rather reluctant to follow the bolder initiatives of the other Nordic countries. For Finland's foreign ministry the trade interests in South Africa have been in command, in Namibia, the moral question has set the tone. Because of the policies of USA; UK and France, necessary action to implement decisions made at the General Assembly could not be taken. Finland called for sanctions along with Nordic countries.

New opportunities arose with Finland's membership in the UN Security Council in 1969-70. During that period a whole 44 % of the topics treated by the SC had to do with racism and colonialism in Africa. Finland took initiative in the founding of UN Trust Fund for Namibia, UN Institute for Namibia (which opened in 1976 in Lusaka) and the Nationhood Programme for Namibia. Finland was active in driving through SC the idea that ICJ should reopen the Namibia case. In 1971 ICJ decided that South Africa occupied the Namibian territory illegally. All these were also sponsored by Finland, and even more by the other Nordic countries. But together these countries often abstained in votes concerning apartheid. Nordics were frustrated by the inefficiency of verbal condemnations in the absence of binding decisions on sanctions by the Security Council. The concrete largely Finnish achievement in SC on Namibia was SC Resolution 283 where member countries were called upon to terminate their diplomatic and consular representation in Namibia.

Finland emphasised throughout the process that it was supporting the Namibian people, not any political groupings like SWAPO. It was indeed only 1973 that Finland mentioned SWAPO in a speech in the UN. Finnish activities in SC in African issues had a power politics side as well. Ambassador Max Jacobsson, the representative of Finland at UN, was a candidate for the vacancy of the General Secretary of the UN 1970-71. He needed all the support he could get, and support from the numerous African states was important, although it had to be balanced with not angering Portugal too much. Need to court African was evident in the invitation of a delegation of OAU to Finland in 1971 as a part of its Nordic tour.

Jacobsson was not elected, but Finland's contacts had been widened and reached the liberation movements.

The Finnish position

The point of departure of Finland is, naturally, that it is only oppressed people themselves, who revolutionise their countries. Outsiders can only support the effort of any other people, they cannot do the job. It is the people themselves, who decide what kind of society they want. Actually, outside help is only effective, if a nation has a vision of the future they are striving at. If there is no goal,

all roads are wrong, no way leads there. It is never easy to form a common vision but it is a work that must be done.

In our study, we have seen the role of hard interests in foreign politics. Nevertheless, international politics is not completely determined by hard power play between state machines: softer human rights considerations do have real weight as such, not only as pieces of propaganda covering more sinister interests. Our study devotes special attention to the role of ordinary people and their organisations striving to influence Finnish foreign policy so that it would clearly and strongly support liberation struggles in Southern Africa. We have also documented its success. The special characteristics of Finland, as a non-aligned welfare state and as part of the Nordic group of states, gave it resources and motivation to support liberation movements. There were restrictions, however.

One restriction grew from real and imagined trade interests connected with good relations with the forces that were continuing apartheid and other forms of colonisation. Furthermore, a close affiliation with those liberation movements which enjoyed Soviet support in the form of military hardware would have harmed Finland's precious neutral image in the eyes of the West. Finland's foreign policy during the Cold War was formed under a clear foreign policy doctrine. At the same time, the United Nations was the central forum of our relations with countries away from our borders. Country's main consideration was to balance between the East and the West and make its neutrality acceptable and useful everywhere, especially among its neighbours. This enhanced Finland's security and was very beneficial for its economy.

The paradox in Finland has been that although the Soviet Union was an important frame of reference, due to the imperatives of security, a major part of the foreign policy was actually intended toward minimising the Soviet influence. Finland has always been, after all, a Western liberal democracy, with a capitalist economic system. A large majority of Finns have always wanted to belong to Western society.

Some factors of Finland's foreign policy decision-making had been internal and non-material. Foreign policy was not only security, trade and guarding other direct interests. A number of young idealists wanted Finland to act on its own to support the progressive forces in international society, basing its policy on a broader definition of national interest. They wanted civil rights and international justice to form the basis of the foreign policy doctrine.

The NGOs concerned with the situation in Africa pursued the cause, and managed to influence public opinion and turn it definitively against colonialism and apartheid. Ideological differences aside, they united NGOs representing large sectors of the society. Their attempts were joined by the

Finnish Lutheran Church, which had carried out mission work in Ovamboland for over a hundred years. Being familiar with the living conditions of black people under the South African regime, the Namibian church and its Finnish servants, the missionaries, took a clear stand for independence, supporting SWAPO. Thus the occupation of Namibia, for a major part, but also the struggle against Portuguese colonialism, was the common denominator which brought together trade unions and churches, radicals and conservatives, young and old, son and father. This broad alliance, which was further widened by the campaign against apartheid, managed to convince Finland's foreign policy decision-makers to bring in moral values as one of the justifications for foreign policy. A lot had to be changed, too, in Finland's decision-making apparatus and in the surrounding world. The period of détente, together with a new active political doctrine, gave President Kekkonen, a chance for new openings in Finland's international activities.

We have noted with satisfaction that the present leadership of Finland, especially the decision makers in foreign politics, to a very large extent have been active in resisting apartheid and supporting liberation struggles in Southern Africa. For instance, president Tarja Halonen, minister of foreign affairs Erkki Tuomioja, speaker of the parliament Paavo Lipponen and the former Finnish commissar in the European Union, presently the chief of the bank of Finland Erkki Liikanen, all have a background of activists supporting liberation struggles in times when this was not considered a part of Finnish foreign policy.

Today Finland is a member of the European Union and quite keen in keeping with the core activities of the Union, trying to influence its content but in all activities behaving like a good loyal member. Being a small nation, this is our way to maximise our influence and security in the world. Our relations with Southern African states are in good and friendly shape and cover many sectors and areas, which insufficiently reflects in the trade figures. However, the value of South African exports to Finland last year were 67 million euro, whereas Finland sold to RSA goods with a value of 266 million euro. The largest item was cellphones, understandably. There are any number of chances to develop cooperation just because good relations, a network of connections and obvious poorly used opportunities, for instance in tourism. Few Finns have experienced the Durban sun, which does its best during the darkest and coldest months in Finland.