

What happened to Allan Boesak?

Corruption in South Africa:

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by [Sarah Ruden](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

When Allan Boesak entered Pollsmoor prison last month, even some of the prison guards demonstrated on his behalf. Before entering the gates, the theologian, antiapartheid activist and onetime leader of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches again asserted he was innocent of theft and fraud involving donations to his Foundation for Peace and Justice (FPJ).

Boesak's imprisonment dominated the news in South Africa. The passionate outpourings both for and against the sentencing resembled those surrounding the O. J. Simpson trial in the U.S. In both cases, the trials exemplified some of the deepest stresses of their societies.

But key differences stand out. Undisputed documents and impeccable witnesses leave little doubt about Boesak's guilt. And the central issue in the Boesak controversy is not race but the rule of law.

What made many people angry at Boesak was his past overseas residence and his foreign passport. People were also angry about the scandal's effect on the FPJ's work. Caro Attwell, a British-born former employee of the Quaker Peace Center, worked with the FPJ on a project in the remote and impoverished town of Loxton. The project collapsed when the Boesak scandal broke and Scandinavian funds were abruptly withdrawn.

"That community had nothing," said Attwell, "and they were going to get a shop. A family that had been selling a few things out of a van built the shop on credit, because the FPJ promised them the money. The wife showed me a list of all the goods they wanted to order. She was so excited. Then we had to go out there and tell them that the money wasn't coming. I'll never forget their faces as long as I live. I don't care what Boesak did to fight apartheid. He deserves to go to jail for Loxton

alone.”

Others who worked with Boesak—including members of the present government—expressed sympathy and solidarity, even while they acknowledged the need for him to go to jail to prove that the rule of law operates in South Africa. To them, the trial was a painful necessity carried out to placate foreign donors and investors who have been treating South Africa with much more caution since the Boesak uproar began. But many people outside the establishment were more partisan, loudly outraged at foreigners’ self-righteousness (as they saw it) concerning their hero.

A damaging scandal over his adultery did not keep Boesak from repeating the offense, and his posh lifestyle is legendary among his neighbors in the well-heeled Cape Town suburb of Constantia. His second wife, Elna, is famed for merely nodding or shaking her head as sales clerks rushed one item of clothing after another to her; she perfected a method for spending thousands of dollars within minutes. Her credit limit must have been very high indeed, and no source for the money has been found other than the FPJ. So heartless were the thefts that a member of Boesak’s own organization finally blew the whistle.

What happened to Boesak? I have not asked him or his wife directly because they insist on being paid for interviews. I have followed their press conferences. Shortly before going to prison, Boesak said that the explanation for everything that had occurred was that the FPJ had been a front for the African National Congress. If true, that would only mean that he lied to his donors and stole from a political movement instead of a charity. He also said that he refused to testify in his own defense in order to avoid implicating ANC leaders, some of them now holding high offices; in effect he claimed impunity as a reward for covering up crimes. He plainly felt that his outrageous actions and even more outrageous defense of them would meet with tolerance—and he was almost right. Most of the charges against him were dropped. His case was stalled for years in the appeals courts, and his sentence was finally reduced from six years to three.

One reason for the tolerance of corruption in Africa is that popular leaders are in short supply. Those who complained about Boesak’s jail term knew that better leaders were not waiting in the wings—there would only be one less leader. Leadership skills are rare in places of widespread poverty and scanty educational opportunities. Boesak emerged almost miraculously from a poor rural town. Rarer

still are the skills—research, legal, journalistic, accounting—needed for the oversight of leadership. Boesak admits that his accounts were in disarray, but he says that it was impossible to keep them in order.

Since able people are in short supply in any African organization, those at the top must take on extra responsibility. This makes leaders feel justified in seeking additional compensation—and there is usually no one to remind them that they are not entitled to such compensation. No wonder African leaders wander so far from the public interest. Nelson Mandela is a notable exception.

The shortage of skills ensures that even when a leader becomes thoroughly corrupt, there are no other contacts available to foreigners who wish to continue working with his organization. Their only option is to send in their own people to take over—a form of “colonization” unacceptable to both sides. Like its sister aid organizations, DanChurchAid cut off funding once the Boesak scandal was confirmed, and it is hard to see how it could have decided otherwise.

There is some sense to the Boesak camp’s claims that he was made a scapegoat. Clergy were exploited by the secular part of the antiapartheid movement. As its effective public relations officers, they were constantly in the line of fire. At the same time, secular activists expressed contempt for the clergy’s establishment ties and tendency to place religious principles above political ones. Inexcusable as Boesak’s thefts were, he might have gotten away with them if he had not been a clergyman.

For a time Boesak was a provincial chairman of the ANC, and this makes him the highest-ranking member of that party to have gone to jail so far. Was he a sacrificial lamb? In a culture of widespread lawlessness, is it defensible to jail him, despite his merits, for nonviolent offenses?

The answer is painful but unavoidable. Just decisions have to stand even if the law is unevenly applied. Otherwise the partial failure of the legal system would become complete failure. That the law dealt with Boesak at all is progress. The problem is assuring the public that progress will continue. In South Africa a number of mechanisms undermine democratic governance, which means citizens have little chance to sample it, learn its benefits, and accept the costs of supporting it. Chief among these mechanisms is negotiation.

In the face of apartheid's unjust laws, negotiation assumed a sacred status. But this status did not diminish when the laws became just. The result has been the rule of powerful individuals and interest groups, who can override nearly any law or policy. While I write this, many thousands of residents of Cape Town's black townships are stranded at home, unable to get to school or work because buses cannot operate. Minibus taxi drivers, the township mafia, are striving for a monopoly even though on their own they cannot meet the demand for transportation. They pull riders by force off the buses, assault and murder bus drivers, and fire bomb the abandoned vehicles.

After each cluster of violent incidents, the taxi union simply calls for negotiation—and the government answers the call. A series of cynical “consultations with all of the stake-holders” piles up compromises and slowly erodes the possibility that public safety will ever be considered first. Gang warfare, land invasions, environmental perils in population centers and every other kind of civil conflict are handled by endless negotiation that buries crimes under the grievances of criminals and puts aside the needs and wishes of the society as a whole. No wonder Boesak believed that he could use his past services as the basis for a deal, and that the courts, too, would be willing to give up the actual enforcement of law.

The government's fondness for negotiations is not hard to understand. The police force of the Western Cape Province is understaffed by 45 percent. The constant temptation must be to let people police themselves through negotiation. But except in minor community disputes, this results in chaos. Moreover, South Africa's continentwide spreading of the gospel of negotiation, encouraged by the rest of the world's eagerness to wash its hands of Africa's problems, makes for lawlessness on a massive scale.

International supporters of South Africa must not succumb to the notion that expectations of decent leadership are a form of “cultural imperialism.” Aid has to be conditioned on accountability, or it slides into support for violence. Food convoys, for example, sometimes bribe militias to get access to starving people and end up serving as supply lines for rebel movements. The West's vast resources then help ensure ever-growing displacement and starvation.

Boesak said that the FPJ was a front for the liberation struggle. If this is true, charitable contributions may have supported violence. Perhaps even more disturbing is that Boesak thinks he was entitled to make that decision.