

# **ADVENTIST RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENTS: A PREFERENCE FOR DICTATORS?**

RONALD LAWSON Ph.D

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## **Scope of the Issue**

I persuaded my university to allow me to pursue my Ph.D. in two disciplines concurrently, Sociology + History, so I did work in both departments and I had advisors from both, and external examiners of my dissertation from both disciplines. So I call myself a historical sociologist. Sociology mostly gives an account of where we are now; a historical sociologist asks also how we got here. The most significant data I have collected in my study of global Adventism is 5,700 longing to use with Adventists in 60 countries in all 13 divisions of the world church. I will share some of these findings with you.

Adventism began in the USA, a democracy, and its earliest other “home fields” were in other democracies—Europe, Australia, South Africa. It expected bad things to happen in those democracies, especially the US, and expected worse to come. In none of those countries has it ever been able to muster enough converts or votes to gather significant political influence or to have more than a very few members elected to public office, nor did it expect this to happen.

Much later, after colonialism had ended and some former colonies also adopted democratic forms of government, Adventist leaders were amazed to find their members being elected to parliaments in significant numbers as Adventism has boomed in parts of the “Global South,” achieving the highest offices in several countries. At this time, for example, Adventists hold the positions of both Prime Minister and Governor-General, and other ministerial posts, in Jamaica, and in Papua-New Guinea an Adventist occupies the position of Prime Minister, and other Adventists hold several other ministerial positions within the Cabinet. Because this pattern was so unexpected, the Church did nothing to prepare its members to hold such positions. In my interviews with Adventist politicians in

Developing Countries, I have found that they have all, without exception stared at me blankly when I have asked them such questions as how their faith has helped shape the policies they have pursued. Some in PNG, for example, stammered eventually that they had helped the Church get a piece of land, and others said that they did not campaign on the Sabbath; one Minister for Social Services in Jamaica, a country with a great deal of poverty, eventually said that he had adopted 19 children. Not one such has addressed the question of how their Adventism has influenced the policies they have tried to enact, except for those in Jamaica and Uganda who have linked the passage of extremely harsh laws against homosexuality to church beliefs, which, in Uganda extended to the death penalty and life imprisonment.

However, Adventists have often gained a great deal of traction dealing with dictators and other authoritarian governments in various parts of the world, where we have often been successful in forming what are known as “exchange relationships” with those in power. An exchange relationship is sometimes described as “one hand washing the other”—that is, a relationship where both sides benefit from it. Adventist relationships with such regimes have evolved with time, so my examples are in chronological order. I will also give you an indication of how frequently these have occurred, and I will consider the dynamics of the relationships I have examined.

The first notable example was with the Soviet Union under Stalin. The initial impact of Stalin’s crackdown on religion was signaled at the church's 1924 All-Russian Congress, when Adventist leaders were forced to sign a statement that military service was a matter of private conscience. This statement was strengthened considerably at the next Congress, in 1928, which proclaimed that military service was a Christian duty, and that anyone teaching otherwise was a heretic and should be disfellowshipped. Meanwhile, new laws proscribed proselytizing activity and charitable work by religious groups. By accepting these conditions, the Adventist church was able to function openly but in a very compromised situation. However, this capitulation caused a schism in the Russian church: some of the Russian Adventists broke away from the officially recognized church and went underground, thus placing themselves in a position where they attracted persecution. The schismatics called themselves the True and Free Adventists: "true" because they were faithful to the commandments to observe the Sabbath and refrain from killing, which they accused the official church of breaking, and "free" because they refused to be registered or connected to the

government. Their leader, Vladamir Shelkov, languished in prison for decades. However, the official church survived, though with little formal structure and long isolated from the World Church; it grew only slowly through personal contacts.

The example of the Adventist relations with the German Nazis and Hitler represented a significant development in the approach to an authoritarian regime. New ingredients included a sympathy for Hitler himself, who Adventists saw as “almost an Adventist”, because he was a non-smoking, non-drinking vegetarian, and a need to distinguish themselves from both Sabbath-keeping Jews and Reformed Adventists, whose pacifism had caused them to break with the official church in Germany during World War I, when the latter had chosen to compromise on military service in order to prove their patriotism and avoid penalties: members of both groups were to die in large numbers in the Nazi concentration camps. Consequently, Adventists celebrated Hitler’s birthday in their daily devotional pamphlets, changed what they called both the Sabbath and Sabbath School to something less “Jewish”, disfellowshipped members with Jewish ancestry, agreed to serve in the German military with arms, announced in a letter from the Central European Division to all members that it was ok to work in munitions factories on the Sabbath, and continued to operate what had been their community services organization with gusto after it was taken over by the Nazis. Consequently, they stayed safe, but after the war it was the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who had been sent in large numbers to death camps because they had refused to do military service, who grew rapidly, while the Adventists languished far behind.

When the Soviet Union took over the countries of Eastern Europe after the end of World War II, Adventists learned that they could gain advantages as a result of toadying to the regimes. They accepted as leaders of their unions those chosen for those positions by the state, and those leaders lived privileged lives, for example, being able to travel to the West when few other compatriots were able to. They also gained advantages by giving the state what pleased it. In Poland, this was to attack the Catholic Church, which was the strongest opponent of the regime, and its nemesis during the papacy of Pope John Paul II, who was a Pole. This was not a problem for Adventists, who felt much more comfortable with the Communist regime than with the Catholic Church. For example, they published one such issue of their magazine to coincide with the Pope’s first visit home. They also cooperated in issuing patriotic appeals to vote in the rigged elections. The Church leaders boasted to me that in return for their assistance, at a time when paper was rationed and what was published was tightly controlled, they were allowed to publish so freely that in a seven-year period the amount of Ellen White’s material

published was exceeded only by the Bible and the works of Lenin. Other privileges accorded them included permission to sell their material freely on the streets and in government book kiosks, and to secure public halls for evangelism. This favored treatment was extended to them even though the Adventist membership in Poland was only 4,700 in a total population of 38 million.

I conducted interviews throughout Eastern Europe twice: near the end of the Soviet era, and again a few years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. My first visit to Romania illustrated that the dynamics of toadying to such regimes hold both advantages and costs for Adventists. The president and secretary told of having good relations with high figures in the regime, and they had recently been permitted to establish a seminary. However, it soon became apparent that the two leaders were determined to control what I heard, for they made sure that they acted as the translator for each interview I did. I noticed that each person interviewed was both cautious and nervous. However, one of the teachers in the seminary spoke English as a result of completing a degree at Andrews University, and he let me know that he could be interviewed in the evening, after the officers had left for the day. After that, seminary students started seeking me out to tell me in broken English “what the situation really was.” These let me know that a major issue was that the government insisted that Adventist students attend their schools on Sabbath mornings. The president encouraged Adventists to comply with that demand, and his own children had done so; but I was told that most Adventists believed that that was desecrating the Sabbath. I was also told that the church leaders had agreed that Adventists would do military service with weapons, no alternative to eating pork, and no Sabbath privileges. Consequently, it was usual for young male Adventists to delay being baptized until after their service was completed.

It was not only the local church leaders who basked in the advantages of toadying to the Communist regimes. Later in the history of the Soviet Union, the General Conference leadership learned that advantages could accrue to it if it toadied more directly to the regime. Neal C. Wilson, President of the General Conference 1979–1990, personally took control of building one such exchange relationship with the authorities in the USSR. In 1979, at a time when the latter were anxious to silence the antigovernment propaganda of the schismatic True and Free Adventists, who were bitterly opposed to such ties, he intervened with an open letter to Soviet Adventists: “The General Conference can recognize only one Seventh-day Adventist organization in any country. This would normally be the one recognized by the authorities ... we encourage all who consider themselves to be Seventh-day Adventists to identify with the recognized body of believers.”

During a subsequent visit to the Soviet Union, Wilson established a close relationship with Konstantin Kharchev, chair of the USSR Council on Religious Affairs. During two visits to the U.S. in 1986 and 1987, Kharchev visited church headquarters and several of its major educational, medical, and publishing institutions. These contacts resulted in approval from the Council on Religious Affairs for the creation of an Adventist seminary in Tula, outside Moscow. Adventists returned the favor by participating in and reporting favorably on Gorbachev's International Forum for a Non-nuclear World and the Survival of Humanity in 1987, by disavowing President Reagan's characterization of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," by offering cooperation in areas of science, education, and medicine, by praising Soviet religious liberty in their respected *Liberty* magazine, and by awarding Kharchev, at their Third World Congress on Religious Liberty in 1989, a citation honoring him as "Spokesman for Human Rights, Promoter of Religious Freedom" – at a time when Gorbachev was seeking to liberalize the Soviet image. Subsequently, Adventists also received permission to establish a publishing house, and church headquarters and a medical clinic in Moscow.

Wilson became similarly involved in Hungary when the church there also split over embarrassment concerning the overt domination and manipulation of their church by the state and, especially, to an agreement to train Adventist pastors at a state-run inter-denominational seminary. They too appealed to the General Conference for recognition of their schismatic group. However, Wilson, after meeting with Imre Miklos, the head of the Hungarian Office of Religion, in 1984, declared again that the General Conference would recognize only groups with government recognition. He endorsed the relationship which the official Adventist church had established with the regime when he brought Miklos to the General Conference Annual Council as a special guest in 1987.

Wilson fancied himself as something of a traveling diplomat and reveled in "photo opportunities" with political leaders. When he was asked about his dream for the church, he replied that it should "grow numerically and financially, and in terms of world acceptance and influence."

Toadying to dictators did not always work out as desired. In South Korea, during the military regimes of Presidents Park and Chun, Adventists were cooperative and loyal, appreciating the stability and social control imposed by the regimes, and their campus remained extraordinarily quiet compared with others. This was appreciated by the presidents, who accredited the college, which then expanded

dramatically. However, the South Korean Adventist church was taught through its interaction with American Adventists during the Korean War that the Adventist position on military service was to refuse to undergo military training with arms. This understanding was reinforced by visiting General Conference officials during that time. Consequently, following the American model, the Korean Adventist College gave basic medical training to those expecting to be drafted, who then asked the military authorities to assign them to medical units or other noncombatant positions where they did not have to use weapons. However, since the South Korean regime failed to issue an order accommodating to the Adventist stance, obtaining noncombatant positions was a matter of chance, and the unlucky conscripts sometimes found themselves with an unsympathetic commander who refused to respect their religious restrictions. Two of these were executed at the frontline during the war when they refused to bear arms, and about 100 other Adventists were sent to prison for as long as 7 years during the 1950s and 1960s for failure to obey orders concerning weapons or Sabbath activities; many more were beaten or otherwise mistreated. Appeals to President Park were successful in securing the release of some of these men, but this approach never solved the basic problem. Indeed, the prison terms to which Adventists were sentenced lengthened during the 1960s. Such a degree of tension with the state over military service was unprecedented among Adventists.

The Koreans who had suffered so much for their faith were caught by surprise when the General Conference responded to the divisions in the American Church during the Vietnam War by declaring that henceforth military service would be a matter of individual conscience. Then, as the military situation in Vietnam deteriorated, the South Korean regime insisted that training with arms be part of the curriculum of all universities. This demand placed the Adventist college in a dilemma: should it conform to the new policy or reject it and face closure? When Korean leaders contacted the General Conference seeking advice, the latter reversed the position it had advocated in the 1950s, arguing that it was not worth risking serious trouble with the government: training with arms should be a matter of individual conscience. The college consequently conformed to the government's demand that it train students with weapons, and left the choice of whether they would comply to the individual consciences of the students, not urging them one way or the other. An administrator explained to me, "If the College had refused to do the training, the Ministry of Education would have closed it, unless the Lord performed a miracle ... We decided that the college was more important than noncombatancy." The result of this decision was that almost every Adventist student and conscript in Korea thereafter trained with weapons. It was reported to

me that more than half of the Koreans who had been imprisoned for refusing to bear arms had since exited the church.

Many of the Filipino Adventists supported President Ferdinand Marcos, who had long overstayed his elected term, because his grandmother was an Adventist and she was said to have taken him to Sabbath School when he was a child. It was assumed, therefore, that he was supportive of the church and its institutions. When popular opinion turned against him, and a movement to overthrow him emerged in the 1980s, this made Adventists nervous, for the leading candidate to replace him, Corazon Aquino, was a devout Catholic and her key backer was Cardinal Sin, the Archbishop of Manilla. Marcos fled in 1986, and Aquino was elected president.

Adventists may have been comfortable with the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, but in Latin America in the 1980s the church administrations were strongly opposed to any government or group that was labelled “communist” and also to what became known as the “Theology of Liberation”, which was put forward mostly by Catholic theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez and embraced the poor, claiming in this to be following the teachings of Jesus. Adventist leaders in Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay spoke positively to me about the military regimes that emerged to combat Leftist regimes or “communist rebels,” and they told me that they disbelieved accounts that those regimes had killed, tortured, or “disappeared” opponents. They also assured me that no Adventists had been killed, by which they meant that anyone who was aligned against the regimes was not really an Adventist. In Argentina and Brazil, where democratic regimes had been restored by the time that I first went there for interviews in 1986, they complained that labor unions were once again legal and conducting strikes: they told me that they preferred the stability of the military regimes. They made it clear that while the church programs such as ADRA provided work for food programs to help feed the poor, they were not in favor of altering the structure of society through such mechanisms as redistributing the large land holdings held by the wealthy. (Ironically, in Peru around the time of World War I, the education that the Adventist missionaries, Fernando and Ana Stahl, had brought to the poor people around Lake Titicaca in the Andes Mountains, had spawned a movement that had resulted in redistribution of land.) I regularly asked Adventists in Latin America whether they had read any Theology of Liberation, which was very well known there at that time, and the answer was almost always no. The ideology that I found there among Adventist leaders at that time continues today: for example, the South American Division is proud of having a strong relationship with President Bolsonaro of Brazil, who speaks positively of the earlier military regimes, and whose Vice President is a General.

One of the most dramatic situations I encountered was in Chile, where General Pinochet had earlier overthrown the Leftist Allende regime, and was by that time a long-term dictator. The Adventist toadying to his regime had resulted in important benefits to the church. In Chile, as in both Brazil and Argentina, the Catholic Church had become a bitter opponent of the military rulers because of their huge human rights violations and its embrace of Theology of Liberation and the poor; consequently, Pinochet was sorely need of being able to demonstrate that he had the support of other religious groups. In all three countries, Adventists took advantage of the opportunity this offered them. They invited Pinochet to a celebration at the Adventist College, which had serious disadvantages: it lacked both accreditation and a decent road to the campus. Pinochet received a resounding welcome at an outdoors ceremony which was filmed by the TV channels, when the President of the College, in a prayer, thanked God for having sent the General “to save the nation.” As a result of the publicity this received, Adventists became known as “the friends of Pinochet.” His regime rewarded the college with both accreditation and a new paved road.

It was explained to me many times that most of the Adventists in Chile were poor, and that of all the churches, only that at the Union headquarters was strongly pro-Pinochet: most of the Adventists had been supporters of Allende, the assassinated Socialist president. Many Adventists all over South America expressed fears to me about what might happen when the Pinochet regime was overthrown.

I found a similar and even more dramatic situation in Guatemala, where Robert Folkenberg had been the President of the Central American Union from 1975 through 1980. Folkenberg was proud that he had known General Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia, the President/military dictator of Guatemala, so well that he often visited him in the presidential palace, and that he had been the first Protestant leader to be given a state farewell reception when he was about to move to a new position at Division headquarters in Florida. When I went to Guatemala in 1986, I was amazed at the quality of the buildings of the mission headquarters, and their location in what was obviously one of the most wealthy parts of the city. I soon discovered that these had previously been the union headquarters, which had moved suddenly to Costa Rica soon after Folkenberg had left. I was soon told a great deal about that situation: once again, as in most parts of Latin America, the vast majority of Guatemalan Adventists were very poor—those that lived in the City were mostly located in the shacks built on the steep slopes of the volcano on which the city is located. Such members had deeply resented the luxury and location of the union headquarters among the rich. I was told that soon after

Folkenberg had left the post there, the union had received a threat of violence from Guatemalan rebels, whom it decided were Adventists. The leadership panicked, and decided rapidly to move their operation to Costa Rica.

Throughout Latin America I was told many times that pastors were well paid, indeed their incomes were said to be several times the average income of their mostly poor parishioners. When I was at the Airport in Puno in the Peruvian Andes, I met a Maryknoll Catholic priest who was also taking my flight, and we contrived to sit together. He turned out to have a Ph.D. in sociology, and it was he who told me about the education brought to the peasants of the Andes from Fernando Stahl creating a rebellion when land distribution was demanded and gained. The priest, who was an American, told me that he lived in a village where the majority of the people were Adventists. The Adventist pastor did not live there because his salary allowed him to live in a small city; nor did he visit the village very often, because he had to care for several churches in order for the mission to afford his salary. The priest told me that while ADRA was teaching the peasants to add an extra crop to their annual rotation on their tiny pieces of land, so that they might better be able to feed their families, he was organizing the Adventists in his village to demand land redistribution.

In Africa, Adventists have often fostered close relationships with presidents who, once elected, have stayed on for decades in dictatorial roles. These have included Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Mobutu Sese Seko of the Congo (then called Zaire), Hastings Banda of Malawi, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Daniel arap Moi of Kenya. Moi is a good example of an African ruler with whom Adventists developed an exchange relationship. As a result of this relationship, he arranged to give the Church a site at Bariton for the Adventist University of East Africa. The land donated was not where the church had hoped to build a university, for it was far from the area near Lake Victoria that is the main concentration of Adventists in Kenya, and also far from the capital of Nairobi. Nevertheless, our leaders felt that it sealed a good relationship between the President and the Church. Moi is Kenya's longest-serving President, having held the post from 1978 through 2002. As he persisted in keeping control, he became increasingly controversial. Nevertheless, when the General Conference held its Annual Council in Nairobi in 1988, at a time following violence and protests, as an election neared, GC President Neal Wilson did not hesitate to bring him to the meeting and shower him with praise and publicity, things which it was certain were very welcome to him and his cause at that time.

Adventist leaders have been slow to critique rulers with whom they have built exchange relationships. It is only those who cross us, and whom we come to see as “unhelpful”, such as, recently, the President of Burundi, who become rulers we are willing to speak out against.

Let me summarize the case I have presented to you.

The core concern when dealing with any authoritarian government that could be hostile to Adventists is survival: to be able somehow to continue worshiping, and to avoid imprisonments and assassinations. The chief method has been to try to demonstrate that we are not a threat by being as cooperative as possible with the regime. It is usually important to Adventists to continue proselytizing if at all possible, to continue operating any schools and other institutions that we may have there, to protect our ability to observe the Sabbath and not serve as regular conscripts in the military, and to continue to retain control over our funds. However, these can be more difficult to achieve, as the church in the Soviet Union under Stalin discovered; they made some compromises in order to achieve the core goals.

We have discovered that in some situations under dictatorial regimes it is possible to improve the situation of the church and its members through forming exchange relationships between the church and the regime. Such benefits have included accreditation of our schools and privileges like being freed from obligations to attend schools or take exams on the Sabbath or to do regular military service with weapons, the right to publish, to send and receive funds internationally, and improved infrastructure (e.g. access roads). Such relationships have included supporting and praising the ruler at a time when other religious groups are being critical of him and his policies. Several of our leaders have also learned that exchange relationships can also bring them personal kudos, such as photo ops with the president, travel privileges, positive personal publicity, and gaining status that is not usually accorded to the leader of a small religious sect.

Several other factors have influenced Adventist relationships with dictators: Adventists are more likely to embrace a dictator who has family ties to Adventism or whose lifestyle is seen as making him “almost Adventist.” Political ideology can play a significant role, though this is not consistent: while Adventists had close relationships with the Communist leaders in post-war Eastern Europe, church leaders in Latin countries turned against the socialist Allende government in Chile, and embraced military regimes that claimed to be defending their countries against

“Communist rebels.” However, while such church leaders embraced the property rights of the wealthy, that position did not resonate among large numbers of church members, who were predominantly poor. I illustrated these problems with the disquiet I tapped among the Chilean laity and the bitterness felt and threats made by poor members in Guatemala, which caused great panic among the leaders there; also with the sad story of Adventists in Nazi Germany, where we literally disfellowshipped members with Jewish ancestry, changed what we called the Sabbath, and encouraged our members to work in munitions factories on the Sabbath and had Adventists serve as regular soldiers when in fact it would have been possible for them to serve in noncombattant roles.

The situations Adventists have faced have been extraordinarily complex, and we seem to have made little effort to arrive at well thought out positions. It surprises me that, for a church so familiar with the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation, we have so often been able to forget that the Bible often calls rulers who mistreat God’s human creatures “beasts.”