

Introduction

The Presidential and National Assembly elections in Seychelles from 20 to 23 July 1993 marked the last stages of the restoration of a multi-party system of government and signalled the beginning of a new era of plural democracy.

Commonwealth involvement in the transition from a one-party system to multi-party democracy emerged from discussions at the Commonwealth summit in Harare, Zimbabwe, in October 1991, and from the renewed commitment of Heads of Government at that Meeting, to promote democracy in member countries. Following discussions with his colleagues in Harare and with the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, President Albert René within weeks of his return to Seychelles, announced on 4 December 1991 that Seychelles would return to a 'pluralistic democratic system'.

A Commonwealth role in the transition process was formally initiated with the request to the Secretary-General from the Government of Seychelles in January 1992 for assistance, including Commonwealth observers at elections. In March 1992 a Commonwealth Secretariat Planning Mission visited Seychelles and confirmed to the Secretary-General that the presence of Commonwealth observers would be welcomed by all, and would be seen as both an insurance and an assurance against anything that would mar the credibility of elections and the stability of the country. At about the same time, the Commonwealth Secretariat sent a legal drafter to Seychelles to assist with the drafting of legislation for the organisation of multi-party elections and referenda. A Commonwealth Observer Group was then sent by the Secretary-General to observe the election for a Constitutional Commission in July 1992. A legal drafter was provided to the Commission by the Secretariat to assist with the drafting of a new constitution. A second Commonwealth Observer Group was constituted by the Secretary-General to be present at a referendum in November 1992 which rejected the draft constitution. When the Constitutional Commission reconvened early this year to prepare a fresh draft, two constitutional experts were sent by the Secretariat to advise the two political parties represented on the Commission, the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF) and the Democratic Party (DP), and to assist generally in the resolution of contentious issues and provisions. Representatives of the Secretary-General were present at the June 1993 referendum which approved the draft constitution emerging from this second round of deliberations.

The Observer Group

Ours was the third Commonwealth Observer Group to be sent to Seychelles during the transition process. We felt privileged to be there at the culmination of an important period in the history of Seychelles. We served as Observers in our personal capacities and not as representatives of countries, governments or organisations to which we might belong. Collectively, we brought to our task extensive experience and expertise in areas of government, national and international politics, law, diplomacy, electoral management and organisation, and election campaigning. The composition of the Group and our support staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat is at *Annex I*.

We had as our terms of reference the following:

The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the request of the Government of Seychelles supported by all the major political parties. It is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the elections in accordance with the law of Seychelles. It is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and determine in its own judgment whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the result of the elections reflects the wishes of the people.

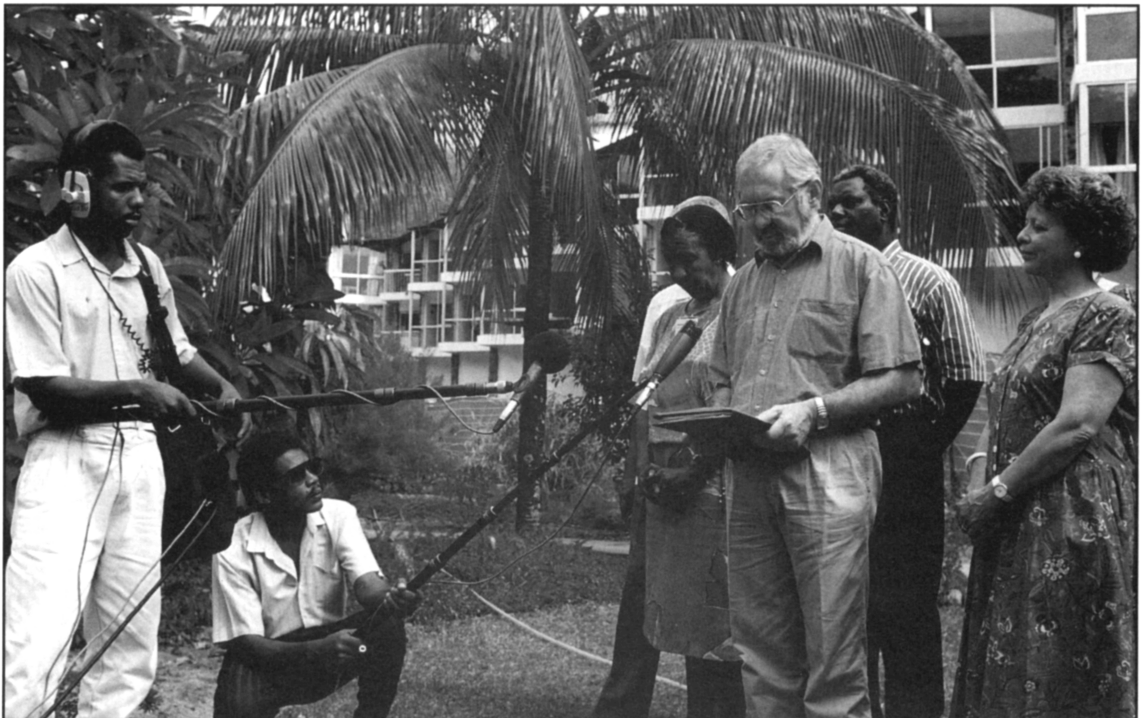
The Group is to act impartially and independently. It has no executive role; its function is not to supervise but to observe the process as a whole and to form a judgment accordingly. It would also be free to propose to the authorities concerned such action on institutional, procedural and other matters as would assist the holding of such elections.

The Group is to submit its report to the Secretary-General, who will forward it to the Government of Seychelles, to the leadership of the parties taking part in the elections and thereafter to all Commonwealth governments.

Method of Work

We gathered in London on 15 July 1993 to be briefed by the Secretary-General on the task ahead of us. By the time of our arrival in Seychelles on the morning of 16 July, four full days of meetings had been arranged for us by the advance team of Secretariat support staff. Our work was made easier by the fact that four members of the Secretariat staff had been to Seychelles before as part of previous Observer Groups, Secretariat planning missions and as special emissaries of the Secretary-General. One of our number, Mr Etienne Kombe, had been a member of the July 1992 Commonwealth Observer Group. They were thus familiar with the personalities and issues of these elections and were able to give us extensive background briefing on the political situation and the issues of concern. In carrying out our tasks and forming views and assessments, we were also able to rely upon the Reports of the two previous Commonwealth Observer Groups to Seychelles, and were guided by our wide-ranging consultations in Seychelles itself. All of this constituted a rich tapestry into which this Report is woven.

On the afternoon of our arrival, we held a press conference and issued a statement, emphasising our independence and impartiality and the mandate of our mission (*Annex II*). We plunged immediately into a programme of meetings until 19 July. We met with the leadership of the seven registered political parties in Seychelles as well as the Presidential candidates of the three parties taking part in the elections, were briefed at length by the Director of Elections on preparations for the elections, and also held discussions with church leaders. A schedule of our engagements with a press statement on the consultations



The Commonwealth Observers attracted attention wherever they went

held are at *Annex III*. On the last day of the campaign on 17 July, we spent an afternoon following candidates from the three parties on their door-to-door canvassing, and were impressed with the spirit of co-operation and goodwill which characterised these elections. The parties taking part in the elections were the SPPF, the DP and the United Opposition – a merger of three small parties, Parti Seselwa, the National Alliance Party and the Seychelles National Movement.

Given that Seychelles is an archipelago made up of 115 islands, polling had to be staged over four days from 20 to 23 July. On the eve of the commencement of polling, we issued a press statement (*Annex IV*). The first three days covered polling on small and isolated Inner and Outer Islands spread over a vast area of the western Indian Ocean. It was an expensive exercise in democracy in that a substantial amount of the total budget for organising these elections was spent on chartering small planes to transport electoral officials, party agents and observers to these far-off islands to enable about 600 voters to exercise their right to vote. Over the three days, six flights and one boat passage were organised to visit 12 islands where mobile polling stations were set up and opened for between 30 minutes and four hours. We were privileged to be able to accompany election officials to eight of these islands, traversing thousands of kilometres of ocean to observe the voting by tiny communities, the smallest of which had only seven voters.

To organise our coverage of the 22 electoral areas on Mahé, Praslin and La Digue, we divided into five teams of two, comprising two Observers or one Observer and one Secretariat staff. (A press statement on our deployment plan is at *Annex V*.) We launched into this second phase of our task before polling day by visiting all the electoral areas and polling stations, many of them at least twice, to talk with the candidates, party activists, District Council chairpersons, the police, electoral officials and people in the street. We attended briefing sessions held by Electoral Officers for party polling and counting agents at each polling station. The day before polling on the main islands of Mahé, Praslin and La Digue (23 July), we inspected polling stations to check on arrangements for 23 July. Everything was in place, tables and chairs arranged and polling booths and extra lighting installed. We were impressed by the interest, enthusiasm, and knowledge about the electoral process and the politics of Seychelles demonstrated by the people we met. They were all ready to vote and were looking forward to the election of a new government and the advent of a new multi-party system.

On 23 July we were at 11 of the 22 polling stations by 6.45 a.m. to observe the stations being set up for the day and to witness the opening procedures. We spent the rest of the day visiting all the polling stations, unannounced, to observe the voting process, and to talk with electoral officials, party agents, candidates and the voters. We returned for the close of the poll at selected polling stations and witnessed the count at the majority of stations. Using our polling station check list and observation notes as guidelines (*Annex VI*), we submitted reports to our operations room to be used for an interim statement and for our final report.

By 8.00 p.m. on polling day we were able to issue the Interim Statement (*Annex VII*), in which we commended the exemplary organisation and conduct of the elections and declared that these arrangements had enabled voters to vote openly, freely and fairly. We had no doubt that the result of the elections would thus accurately reflect the will of the people of Seychelles.