

Chapter 3

The Campaign

A Fresh Start

The campaign was the beginning of the end of a transition process which had spanned more than 18 months. Preparations for two elections and two referenda during that period had fully stretched the human and financial resources of all political parties, and a discernible degree of 'election fatigue' had clearly contributed to the subdued political climate surrounding the final act in the transition – the Presidential and National Assembly elections.

The prolongation of the transition process, brought about by the rejection of the first effort of the Constitutional Commission, allowed both Government and political parties enough time to contemplate the special needs of the country and to put in train measures to defuse what had become a potentially serious situation. In July 1992, opposition leaders, many of whom had recently returned home after years in exile, had added a special dimension to the political life of the country. They and their followers made no effort to hide their bitterness about events which had occurred during the previous 15 years; their determination that this should not happen again was palpable.

The initial prospects in December 1991 for a peaceful and smooth transition were not hopeful, but since then attitudes had changed dramatically. That there was a more positive mood prevailing in the country soon became apparent to us, not only in the meetings we had with local leaders immediately after our arrival in Seychelles but also in our conversations with the voters. We arrived two days before the election campaign came to an official end on 17 July 1993. The major political rallies were over but we managed to accompany candidates from all parties contesting the elections as they carried out their final 'door-to-door' canvassing.

We found a country and a people determined to make a fresh start and to put divisive attitudes behind them. We were told that before our arrival, the 17-day formal campaign had been conducted in a friendly and open manner. This was confirmed by those members of our Group who had been in Seychelles for the July 1992 election for the Constitutional Commission. As we accompanied candidates in the last stages of their door-to-door campaigning, we noted that they were invited into the homes of supporters of opposing parties. We were told that in the past candidates would not have dared to approach a household known to support another party. We had the clear impression that the electorate was willing to listen to what each side had to offer. They seemed to realise that this was the culmination of a longer transition process than anyone had anticipated, and that their participation was important. They would finally have a new government, elected under a multi-party system.

We were impressed by this fundamental change in the attitudes of leaders and electorate alike and were assured that it was the result of events during the past year. The televising of the sittings of the Constitutional Commission apparently enabled the people to become better informed and more involved in the political process which directly concerned them. It also gave them an unrivalled opportunity to scrutinise and judge the activities of the politicians. This cooling-off period also gave the smaller opposition parties time to contemplate the realities of political life and to assess their chances of survival. The end result was a softening of the attitude of the ruling party, the SPPF led by President René, the adoption of a more pragmatic approach by its main rival, the DP led by Sir James Mancham, and the coming together of three smaller parties in a coalition, the United Opposition. Two other smaller parties, the MSD and the SLP, had thrown in their lot with the DP.

Russell Marshall (left), the Observer Group Chairman, and Virginia Moshabesha (right), another Observer, with President Albert René



A Mood for Reconciliation

In our meetings with political leaders, we were left in no doubt of their determination to maintain the mood of co-operation which had been engendered in the efforts to find an acceptable constitution. An important outcome of this development was the agreement reached between President René and Sir James Mancham to establish a small joint committee to meet weekly to discuss and resolve contentious issues. They met, each with two advisers, away from the attention of the media to work out ways in which to promote national reconciliation.

This decision clearly had a significant effect on the tone of the election campaign. The leaders of the two larger parties made every effort to keep the campaign as unprovocative as possible. A week before the election, they issued a joint appeal to all party supporters for 'civility and tolerance' in the period leading up to election day. The appeal, which came after campaign posters and banners were damaged in incidents across Mahé, stated that every party had the right to put up material without interference. The earlier hostility between them, which had created such a tense atmosphere in the previous polling events, was markedly reduced.

The value of the work of the joint committee was confirmed to us by both President René and Sir James Mancham. When we met President René he told us that during the past year, he had come to the conclusion that given the size and vulnerability of Seychelles, there was a need for a different style of government. Winners and losers would have to work together if the country was to progress.

The need for co-operation and the determination to achieve national reconciliation was endorsed by the Democratic Party leader. After the November 1992 referendum, Sir James Mancham took the decision that the time had come to defuse the volatile and potentially dangerous situation which had built up between Government and opposition parties. He wrote an article putting forward his view that, if after the elections the major political parties could not agree to cohabit in a civilised way, the country would be the loser. He adopted a conciliatory approach at the meetings of the reconvened Constitutional Commission and readily agreed to serve on the joint committee to look at all issues which could affect the future of the country.

The Democratic Party presidential candidate, Sir James Mancham, greeting voters in Beau Vallon



One of the first issues tackled by the joint committee was the question of the restoration of land and property which had been acquired by the Government during the period of one-party rule. This issue was also tied up with the rights of many of the exiles who had left Seychelles because of their opposition to the Government. We raised the issue with President René, who told us that some property had been restored; that compensation would be offered; and in cases where land had been acquired and not used, it would either be returned or former owners would be invited to participate if commercial development was planned.

Another matter raised in the joint committee was the appointment of an independent Board of Directors for the SBC. Opposition parties had charged that the President had not consulted them and had objected to the appointment of Board members who were either civil servants or people alleged to be sympathisers of the ruling party. Discussions in the joint committee would contribute to an eventual resolution of the dispute when a more representative Board would be constituted after the elections.

We have no doubt that a great deal of credit for the change in the political tone of the country must be given to President René and Sir James Mancham. But while the relationship between the two leading parties had improved, this, the United Opposition complained, was at the expense of those excluded from the joint committee, and who were not consulted on matters affecting the political life in the country. They also complained that in the pursuit of national reconciliation, the DP had been less than robust in advancing the opposition cause.

They also informed us that meetings with the major parties were rare and that they aired any grievances about the elections with the Director of Elections. We were also informed that they had had problems with the hire of District Council premises for meetings. They claimed that on the rare occasions when they had obtained the use of a District Council community centre, they were invariably told at the last minute that there had been a mix-up with the bookings, and that they had to make way for some other function.

Activities of the Political Parties

The campaign benefited greatly from the more positive mood surrounding the elections. For the SPPF, the campaign was an opportunity to consolidate their position, and to explain to

supporters that there would be changes in the style of governing. The DP faced the challenge of allaying the anger and suspicion of many followers who were unhappy about the reconciliation efforts and who had to be convinced that the purpose of the exercise was to advance democracy. Meanwhile, the United Opposition told us that they had to rally their supporters in what was becoming for them an increasingly uphill struggle in a political environment dominated by the SPPF and the DP.

As in all elections, the two major parties held public rallies and all parties deluged supporters with manifestoes and other campaign literature. They used the electronic media to communicate, and posters to attract rather than educate voters. Rallies held by the two leading parties attracted good crowds, where manifesto promises were repeated and attempts made to explain some of the real issues facing the country, such as the state of the economy.

The United Opposition, hobbled by a lack of funds, decided that they would not hold rallies, calculating that since only committed supporters would attend, it would not be the best use of scarce resources to go to the expense of hiring buses to transport them. They decided to concentrate their meagre resources on door-to-door campaigning which they were undertaking for the first time. When we met with members of this party, they said that contesting the elections had been especially difficult and that the maximum they had been able to give each candidate for expenses was SR2,000 (about £300).

The Role of the Media

With all their limitations, the media in the Seychelles made a commendable effort to meet the formidable challenges confronting them since the country began its move towards multi-party democracy. In the year since the first Commonwealth Observer Group had monitored elections in Seychelles, there had been few changes in terms of ownership and party allegiance; but there were certainly fewer complaints about unfair or scurrilous reporting of political events.

Indeed, a welcome development was that we received no reports of pressures on journalists, nor of censorship. The media had been left to get on with it, and despite their limitations, largely due to inexperience and having to operate for 15 years under a one-party system, it is fair to record that they performed well in informing readers, listeners and viewers about the elections.



Reverend Wavel Ramkalawan, Leader of Parti Seselwa and a United Opposition candidate for the National Assembly, woos votes in the hills of St Louis

The Print Media

The *Nation*, the only daily newspaper, is owned by the Government and consequently gave most coverage to the activities of government ministers and the SPPF. It provided full coverage of the SPPF manifesto, and somewhat less space for the other parties. We found it a little surprising that in the period immediately prior to the Presidential and National Assembly elections, so little space was devoted to the campaign. We were told that more could have been done by such a well-established paper on voter education and preparing the people of Seychelles for the changes ahead. For example, there could have been articles explaining how multi-party systems operate and on the duties of citizens in such an environment.

The other publications were opposition party organs set up primarily to promote their own policies and to provide some degree of balance to the Government and SPPF's advantage in owning the *Nation* and the party weekly, *The People*. These were *Regar*, launched by the Parti Seselwa and which now advanced the cause of the United Opposition; and two papers which were published by the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, the *Seychelles Weekly* and the *Liberal* respectively. With all their shortcomings, they were successful in facilitating the flow of news and information.

These new party publications complemented the Seychelles Institute for Democracy's newsletter, *Liberté*, and the Roman Catholic Church's fortnightly magazine *L'Echo Des Isles*, which for many years was the only source of alternative news. It is still a vigorous publication and still reports national political issues.

The Broadcast Media

The most surprising development was the evolution of the SBC from being the arm of the Ministry of Information into a broadcasting corporation. It had been at the centre of a great deal of controversy during the last election; now it was making considerable efforts to meet the demands of a new and changing situation. The SBC, which is responsible for radio and television transmission, is still grossly understaffed and underfunded and this is apparent in the quantity and quality of its output, still limited to five hours daily in the evenings. It has the unenviable task of having to broadcast in three languages, English, French and Creole, which places an additional burden on its resources. Despite the challenges in these elections, it performed creditably.

We were told by all political parties that the SBC had been even-handed in its approach to party political broadcasts and other election coverage. Besides undertaking a generous schedule of party political broadcasts, the SBC managed to maintain routine coverage of the rounds of meetings, statements, press conferences and rallies throughout the campaign as well as its own news output.

Unlike previous occasions, when the Director of Elections had arranged an agreed programme of radio and television broadcasts, the SBC, this time, had taken the initiative of inviting all political parties to meet with the SBC Board to discuss their requirements.

Not all the political parties responded promptly or positively to the invitation, but the SBC eventually obtained agreement for a programme of broadcasts which was more than fair. This allowed the three Presidential candidates a total of 45 minutes each of broadcast time on radio and television respectively over the period of the campaign. They were able to have a weekly broadcast of not more than 15 minutes on radio and the same on television to put across their message. At the same time, each National Assembly candidate was allocated five minutes of airtime over radio and television. Each day over a 12-day period, candidates from three or four electoral areas were able to put their messages across. At least 45 minutes of radio and television time was given over to election broadcasts every evening during the campaign. When one considers the limited transmission hours of SBC television, it is remarkable that they allowed so much time to be put at the disposal of candidates.

The party political broadcasts were transmitted twice on television – first after the main seven o'clock news and later in the evening, and on radio at eight o'clock in the morning and at 8.30 p.m. after the evening news. The first party political broadcast was transmitted on 5

July and these broadcasts continued until 16 July. An acceptable and fair system for transmission of these broadcasts was developed by the SBC, whereby the Presidential candidates were invited to draw lots. Parliamentary candidates were ranked in alphabetical order.

In addition, the SBC produced material for the party political broadcasts of most of the Presidential and National Assembly candidates. There was no censorship, except to prevent defamatory or indecent material being used, and the SBC relinquished editorial control over the content of these broadcasts. So great was the pressure on the SBC's staff and facilities, that a major proportion of its resources was turned over to this work, and only the news department was able to function properly. By the time the campaign came to an end, neither the SBC nor the political parties could have coped with any demand for extra airtime.

Radio and television are the channels of choice for public information in Seychelles. We were told that every household had a radio and most had a television set, which leads us to believe that the voters had no difficulty in finding out about the candidates and issues of these elections. It seems to us that this transition period has enabled the SBC to develop a measure of competence in covering complicated meetings such as those of the Constitutional Commission and had earned respect for its handling of the public information aspects of these elections.

The complaints we received were routine: that hardly a day had passed without some coverage of the Government's achievements and that special attention was paid to government ministers. One party was upset with the hefty bill for the production of their party political broadcasts, which seemed somewhat unrealistic as they were receiving airtime free of cost.

But these complaints were minor and did not detract from the overall appreciation by all parties of the effort which the SBC had made to meet the special demands made on its staff and facilities. We hope that with a new Board, additional funding, more and better trained staff, it can, in time, provide the people of Seychelles with the competent broadcasting service which they deserve.