

Conclusions and Recommendations

In our Terms of Reference we were asked to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the General Election, consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process and, on that basis, determine whether the conditions existed for a free expression of will by the electors.

We have observed widely and, we believe, well. We have been able to meet with a wide range of people and organisations and, most of all, the voters. We have travelled extensively, sampling the process in all parts of the country including the smaller islands. On the voting days we visited some 323 polling stations, approximately 40 per cent of the total, and during the counting of the votes we were present at all four counting centres.

When we met up again in Suva to write our report we noted that the General Election took place in conditions of peace. The political parties campaigned openly. The media could and did report objectively. The Elections Office organised the polling well. The voters voted freely and secretly. The counting process was generally in line with procedures and was credible.

So far as the whole process is concerned, having observed as much of it as we could we are strongly of the view that the conditions did exist for a free expression of will by the electors and that generally the results of the elections reflected the wishes of the people.

Beyond that principal finding, we have some suggestions and recommendations for the future. We believe that:

- the people of Fiji Islands should continue to move away from the communal system of representation: we look forward to the day when there is one electoral roll and every citizen of Fiji Islands sees themselves, and is seen, simply as Fijian;
- the present electoral system should be reviewed, in particular to remove the complications arising from the current system of voting and the disenfranchisement which results from the placing of ticks below the line: the present system is too complex and results in too many invalid ballots;
- Parliament should restore the legal provision which enables counting officers to use their discretion to admit a vote when the intention of the voter is clear;
- the Government, Electoral Commission and Office of the Supervisor of Elections, as appropriate in each case, should also consider:
 - taking appropriate steps to strengthen the Constitutional independence of the Electoral Commission and the Office of the Supervisor of Elections, making the Supervisor full-time, expanding his office and increasing its resources so that during the whole electoral process it functions on a continuous basis and independently of the state, in particular of the Divisional Commissioners and District Officers;
 - reassessing the voter registration arrangements, with a view to the development of a satisfactory continuous registration process which ensures the inclusion of all who are entitled to be on the register;
 - introducing a numbered Identity Card: this would have wider advantages, but so far as elections are concerned could help to speed up the polling station process and act as a further check against electoral fraud;

- agreeing on tight legal prohibitions on all forms of treating: the distribution of food and other items in return for votes at the General Election is entirely unacceptable in a democracy and should be stopped;
- increasing voter education efforts, to ensure that voters are completely clear about how the electoral system – especially the voting mechanism – works;
- reducing the voting age to 18 years and making a particular effort to involve young people in democracy, through civic education, and activities in schools such as mock elections and model parliaments;
- devising disclosure requirements for both party funding and expenditure, so that there is transparency at every point;
- providing state funds to assist in the strengthening of the political parties, their meaningful participation in elections and the maintenance of a truly democratic system of government;
- introducing Codes of Conduct for the media and for political parties and candidates at the next General Election;
- reviewing the arrangements for absentee voters, in particular to change the postal ballot system with a view to greater transparency and efficiency at the postal ballot centres and speedier verification at the count: consideration might be given to closing postal ballot centres before the voting begins and undertaking verification at an earlier stage;
- improving the organisation of polling stations and revising their number and distribution, so that at the next General Election they cope better and there are no long queues;
- revising the regulations so that party agents are able to be present at all stages of the process, including the postal ballot centres and the movement of the ballot boxes from the polling stations;
- ensuring the greater use of information technology to enhance the management and administration of the entire electoral process;
- amending the law, so that employees are entitled to time off work to vote.

We want to end by:

- noting that the security forces have played a valuable and positive role in this election: we urge them to continue to recognise the importance of their role in maintaining a democratic and parliamentary system of government and the need at all times to remain subordinate to the Constitution and the rule of law;
- commending the involvement of young people in this electoral process – as voters, as officials and as party workers: young people are the future for Fiji Islands and we hope that they will play an increasingly important part in Fiji's democracy;
- congratulating the voters, commending the responsible role of the political parties and expressing the hope that the atmosphere of peace, tranquillity and respect for the rule of law that has characterised this election should continue afterwards, in all aspects of life;
- urging that Fiji Islands' civic institutions should in future participate fully in the democratic life of the country, without being partisan, and help the nation to move away from a situation where race is a major factor in democratic arrangements and in the direction of reconciliation, harmony and non-racialism.