

Deepening Democracy

The principles enshrined in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991 – encompassing fundamental political values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law – are widely accepted in the Commonwealth. Indeed, since the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting at Edinburgh in 1997, adherence to these principles is essential for an application for membership to succeed. Since 1995 the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (*see previous chapter*) has met to deal with 'serious and persistent' violations of these principles.

Progress has been marked since 1990. At the time of the Harare Declaration, nine countries were under military or one-party rule. In 1997, two military governments remained; by the end of June 1999 there were none (although at the time of publishing recent developments in Pakistan indicate a possible setback).

The Secretariat helps countries to consolidate democracy in several ways – for example by observing elections, providing expert advice and assistance to democratic institutions, and promoting discussion on key aspects of the democratic process, through conferences, workshops and meetings.

The Secretariat ensures that gender considerations are to the fore in all these activities, such as by requiring that Commonwealth election observers specifically look for a number of indicators regarding the participation of women at election time.

Observing Elections

Observing elections is one of the most visible means by which the Commonwealth helps strengthen democracy in member countries. Since October 1990, the Secretary-General has sent 28 observer groups to 19 member countries. Observers are eminent

Commonwealth citizens drawn from all regions of the Commonwealth. Although constituted by the Secretary-General the Observer Groups are independent of the Secretariat. Between 1990 and 30 June 1999, 385 observers (297 men and 88 women) from 46 countries had served as members of Commonwealth Observer Groups.

In this review period the Commonwealth observed seven elections – in Guyana (December 1997), Seychelles (March 1998), Lesotho (May 1998), Nigeria (two elections in February 1999), Antigua and Barbuda (March 1999) and South Africa (June 1999). In addition, the Secretary-General sent teams comprising Secretariat staff members to witness Nigeria's local government elections in December 1998 and state elections in January 1999, to Malawi for its Parliamentary and Presidential Elections of June 1999 and to Vanuatu for the March 1998 general election.



Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman (*left*) of Bangladesh led a Commonwealth Observer team to the elections in Antigua and Barbuda in March 1999

At the Seychelles Presidential and National Assembly Elections, the Commonwealth for the first time mounted a joint observation exercise with another international organisation. The Commonwealth's five observers were joined by three appointed by La Francophonie and they presented a jointly agreed report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General and Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary-General of La Francophonie.

The Secretariat also provides technical assistance in the electoral field. Prior to the 1998 multi-party elections in Lesotho, advisers were sent to help in the drafting of electoral legislation, the establishment of the new Independent Electoral Commission and other preparations for the elections. Assistance was also extended to Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission in the run-up to the 1999 elections (*see previous chapter*).

The Secretariat and the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom (DFID) jointly extended assistance to the Electoral Commission of South Africa by providing three trainers of election officers and a budget adviser. Advisers were made available in response to requests from the Electoral Commissions of Malawi and The Gambia, while other forms of assistance were provided to the election management bodies of Botswana and Namibia and the constitutional review process in Guyana. A training programme was organised for senior African election officials.

Strengthening Democratic Structures and Institutions

Important though elections are, the Commonwealth recognises that democracy amounts to much more and that the association has a key role to play in strengthening the practices, culture and institutions



The Commonwealth encourages women to participate fully in elections

Training domestic election observers featured in the new initiative on Deepening Democracy (*facing page, bottom*)

South Africa

The Commonwealth's special country programme for South Africa ended on 30 June 1998 – five years after it began. Originally designed to help that country's transition to a non-racial democracy, its focus later shifted to strengthening democratic institutions.

There were four priority areas in the programme's final year:

- ❖ **Democratic and constitutional development:** 90 officials were trained in legislative drafting; an adviser was attached to the Independent Electoral Commission to assist it in preparing draft electoral legislation for the June 1999 elections;
- ❖ **Justice:** A Senior Legal Adviser has been provided to the Ministry of Justice from August 1998 to July

2000 to advise on the implementation of the Vision 2000 strategy for the transformation of the justice system;

- ❖ **Gender:** An adviser was attached to advise the Commission on Gender Equality on policies, implementation of its Programmes of Action, gender sensitisation and awareness, and with preparations for a major Southern African Development Community conference on violence against women;
- ❖ **Public sector reform:** An expert was placed with the Presidential Review Commission on the Transformation of the Public Service and other experts placed with provincial administrations in collaboration with the UNDP; further expert assistance was given to the provinces in specialised areas including financial management, project management, information technolo-

gy, human resource development, communications and the clarification of roles and responsibilities of provincial public service officials.

The programme ended on 30 June 1998 with a major conference on 'South Africa and the Commonwealth: Partnership for the New Millennium' in Pretoria. Commonwealth assistance to that country is now delivered through other Secretariat programmes. The Secretariat will continue to attach priority to requests from that country to help it to consolidate itself as a non-racial democracy.

In its five years, 272 experts or consultants from 27 countries were involved in the special programme. Total expenditure over this period was £3.2 million. In addition, £2.7 million in external funding was secured under this special programme, of which over £500,000 was administered by the CFTC.

which sustain and deepen democracy in between elections and, more importantly, for the long term.

Largely through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC), technical assistance is offered to election management and judicial bodies, parliaments, human rights commissions and government departments so that they may make the fullest possible contribution to the proper functioning of the democratic system.

In the period under review the Secretariat organised five major conferences and workshops on aspects of democracy. Following a two-year series of regional workshops for election management bodies, the Secretariat organised a pan-Commonwealth Conference of Commonwealth Chief Election Officers in Cambridge, UK, in March 1998 to stimulate discussion and an exchange of information with a view to the promotion of best practice and further improving Commonwealth elections. Chief election officers and other senior election officials from 43 countries participated with observers from the United Nations, the

Organisation of African Unity, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and DFID. The conference was financed by a grant from the British Government.

In June 1998, the Secretariat and the CPA together organised a workshop in London on the Role of the Opposition to consider the reciprocal rights and responsibilities of government and opposition parties. Participants included parliamentarians, academics and journalists from 19 Commonwealth countries. This was the first in a series of workshops on the theme Deepening Democracy. It was followed by a workshop for Commonwealth domestic election observers held in Jamaica in May 1999, attended by representatives of the domestic observer bodies of 10 Commonwealth countries. This meeting has recommended a number of initiatives to strengthen domestic election observation in the Commonwealth.

A colloquium on Parliamentary Supremacy and Judicial Independence was held in June

1998 with support from the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Commonwealth Foundation. Its objective was to promote good governance, the rule of law and human rights through establishing guidelines on good practice in the co-existence of the Executive, Parliament and the Judiciary. The resultant principles and guidelines, called the Latimer House Guidelines, have since been distributed throughout the Commonwealth.

In January 1999, the Secretariat and UNESCO jointly organised a colloquium in Paris entitled Towards a Constructive Pluralism. This considered the characteristics of culturally, religiously and ethnically diverse societies, the prevention and combating of 'divisive pluralism' and ways in which a positive and constructive pluralism may be promoted for the future. It was attended by 40 participants from 29 countries including politicians, academics and representatives of civil society. Participants urged the Commonwealth Secretariat and UNESCO to stimulate further discussion on issues of pluralism, best practice and encourage the creation of "early warning mechanisms".

