

## Advancing the Democratic Ethic



The Commonwealth's commitment to its fundamental political values, and especially to the democratic ethic, deepened with the endorsement of the Millbrook Action Programme by Heads of Government in 1995. By mid-1997, only two military regimes remained among the Commonwealth's 53 members: Nigeria had been suspended from membership in 1995; Sierra Leone had suffered a reverse in its democratic evolution in May 1997 with a military coup. Both countries remain on CMAG's agenda.

### Roundtable on Democracy

One of the most visible signs of the deepened commitment to democratic practice came with the Roundtable of Heads of Government of Commonwealth Africa on Democracy and Good Governance in Africa which was attended by 16 Heads of State and Government from Commonwealth African countries in Botswana in February 1997. The Secretary-General had convened the Roundtable in order to give African Commonwealth Heads of Government and political leaders an opportunity to review the progress of democracy in their respective countries and exchange views on how they might meet present and future challenges.

A unique Preparatory Meeting, which immediately preceded the Heads of Government session, brought together 41 representatives of both government and opposition parties of practising democracies in Africa, some of whom had had little or no direct contact with each other in their own countries. At the end of this meeting, the representatives presented to the Heads their joint proposals for strengthening democracy in Africa.

### TOWARDS BETTER ELECTIONS

One of the most important aspects of Commonwealth work has been assistance in promoting good electoral practice. Following two pan-Commonwealth meetings of Commonwealth Chief Electoral Officers in 1993 and early 1995, three meetings for Chief Electoral Officers were held on a regional basis – for the Pacific in 1995, for the Caribbean in 1996, and for Asia and the Indian Ocean in 1997. Participants exchanged experiences and information on the key elements in the electoral process, and these meetings gave them the opportunity to strengthen practical co-operation between Commonwealth election management bodies. A booklet on *Good Commonwealth Electoral Practice* has been produced and distributed to assist them in this regard.

*At the Roundtable ... African Commonwealth Heads of Government gathered in Botswana to discuss democracy*



At their Retreat-style session, the Heads of Commonwealth Africa reaffirmed their commitment to the principles contained in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration and their determination to work towards the consolidation of democracy and good governance. They agreed that this required a national effort by all political leaders to cultivate a culture of tolerance, mutual respect and co-operation to promote national peace and stability. They acknowledged that the opposition had an important constructive role to play if democracy was to be sustained, and they recognised that the participation of women, especially at decision-making levels, was essential. Heads of Government expressed their hope that they could meet again to evaluate progress.

*(below) Commonwealth observers at the 1995 elections in Tanzania*

*(bottom) A Papua New Guinean voter carrying a traditional billum bag from Eastern Highlands Province casts her ballot during the General Election 14-28 June 1997, while a Commonwealth observer watches the process. The Commonwealth was the only group of international observers in Papua New Guinea and praised the people for their 'determination to express their democratic rights'*



## Observing Elections

Multi-party elections are an important component of democratic systems, and Secretariat assistance in this area has been at three levels: pre-election technical assistance to promote sound electoral preparations and conditions for a level playing field; observation of the electoral process, including part of the campaign and polling day itself; and post-election assistance. Commonwealth election observer missions continued to play a vital role in the second of these phases.

The Commonwealth Secretary-General constitutes Commonwealth Observer Groups at the request of member governments and with the agreement of the main political parties in the country in question. Members of such Groups are drawn from Commonwealth countries which follow democratic practices, with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association frequently assisting in finding suitable parliamentarians to serve as observers.



Since mid-1995, the Commonwealth has observed seven national elections: in Tanzania (October 1995), Sierra Leone (February 1996), Bangladesh (June 1996), Ghana (December 1996), Pakistan (February 1997), Cameroon (May 1997) and Papua New Guinea (June 1997). Observers were also sent to an important by-election in Bangladesh in September 1996.

### **Strengthening Democratic Structures and Institutions**

The Secretariat provides practical assistance, mainly funded through the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC), to member countries to strengthen democratic structures, institutions and procedures before and after elections.

It has provided experts, direct policy advice and training programmes in constitutional, electoral, legal and other fields. Help has been provided with the creation or strengthening of various watchdog institutions, such as independent electoral commissions, human rights commissions and ombudsmen.

In the two years from mid-1995, the Secretariat assisted several countries in the establishment of up-to-date election legislative schemes, codes of conduct for political parties and candidates, training programmes for election officials, voter education programmes, election logistics and enhancement of gender perspectives. The Secretariat was instrumental in mounting a joint effort with the British and South African Governments to undertake an evaluation study of the local government elections in South Africa in 1995.

The Secretariat has published the first of two parts in a volume on election laws of 37 Commonwealth countries, and is preparing election case studies as well. It has also published a compilation of papers presented at the election training workshop held in Botswana in March 1996.

#### **WOMEN AT THE POLLS**

The Secretariat has made it a point to include as many women observers as possible in Observer Groups. Briefings by women's organisations during such exercises are now a standard feature and concern for women, in relation to the framework for an election and in the wider society, is reflected in all other briefings observers receive from political parties, Commonwealth diplomats and other interested groups. In assessing preparations for the elections and on polling day, observers are urged to look for evidence of activities and measures to encourage the participation of women and to see whether the turnout indicates that women were deterred from voting.



*Commonwealth observers look for evidence that women are encouraged to vote ... here women queue at a polling station in Bangladesh in 1996*