

## CHAPTER 7

# A Liberation Election: Summary of Conclusions

The Commonwealth Observer Group wholeheartedly congratulates the people of South Africa on their achievement in bringing about a fully democratic and non-racial Government.

We salute the statesmanship of South Africa's political leadership. The transitional structures which they established enabled the people to leave behind centuries of discrimination and to begin anew with a government of national reconciliation. The real and undisputed winners were all the people of South Africa who demonstrated to each other and to the world that they could successfully accomplish this historic and momentous transition.

### Context

- Even in the best of circumstances, meeting the deadlines set for the organisation and conduct of the first South African elections would have been a monumental and daunting task and bound to encounter substantial organisational challenges.
- The IEC had both to establish itself and deliver national and provincial elections within a four-month time-frame. The challenges confronting the IEC were compounded by the political decision in early February to have separate ballot papers for the national and provincial elections and by the last minute entry into the elections of the IFP.
- The IEC's preparatory work was seriously affected by the unavailability of adequate data on the size of the potential voting population. A nationwide census will greatly help the conduct and administration of the next elections.
- These elections were also complicated by the complex legal structures and electoral regulations put in place to deliver free and fair elections. These complexities reflected decades of deep suspicion emanating from South Africa's traumatised political history. Other factors, such as violence and intimidation in some areas, hindered timely preparations throughout much of the campaign period.
- The absence of a register of eligible voters exacerbated the logistical challenges facing the IEC, making it difficult to estimate the likely



*At the inauguration, President Mandela, flanked by his Deputies, Thabo Mbeki (right) and F W de Klerk.*



*Outside, jubilant crowds celebrated the death of apartheid.*

demands upon individual voting stations and reducing the controls over possible abuse. The lack of a voters' register also made the identification of voters at voting stations more onerous.

- The right of the voter to cast a vote anywhere in the country provided flexibility, but created considerable problems in the provision of materials for voting stations.

### **Preparations**

- This was South Africa's first experience of democratic elections, with most of the electorate having no previous experience of voting. Voter education played a significant part in introducing and familiarising millions of South Africans with the procedures involved in voting. The success of voter education was borne out by the small proportion of invalid ballots.
- Many South Africans did not possess valid identity documents. This required a considerable administrative effort in issuing TVCs. A concerted attempt to enfranchise would-be voters was exerted in the final period up to the elections, and on voting days. We are not able at the time of publication to judge the overall success of this effort but believe it to have been largely successful. We were impressed by the particular efforts made to ensure that nobody was denied access to a TVC.
- The late appointment of Provincial and District Electoral Officers and the difficulties in selecting sites for voting stations delayed the recruitment of POs, thereby reducing the time available to select and train voting station staff. The last minute entry of the IFP necessitated the recruitment and training of additional POs, in some cases only a day before the elections. Delays in the final selection of voting stations affected the planning and logistical arrangements for the elections as voting stations were being identified and set up on the eve of the poll, and even on voting days.

### **The Campaign**

- The decision by the IFP to contest the elections led to a marked easing of political tension. The final days of the campaign were remarkably free of violence. Sadly, the prelude to voting was marked by bombings on the streets of Johannesburg, Germiston and elsewhere. Such actions only seemed to unite all South Africans in a determination to exercise their right to vote without regard to intimidation or violence.
- These later stages were also marked by large rallies held by the major parties. These were peaceful and generally well-organised, with party marshals exerting impressive control over supporters. The conciliatory approach by many speakers at these rallies contributed to a climate of political tolerance, and there was little evidence of incitement against the supporters of other parties.

### **Areas of Concern**

- The inability of the IEC to provide high security electoral materials to around 20 per cent of South Africa's voting stations on the first day of general voting caused some initial chaos.
- Regulations and procedures changed rapidly and in many cases were only imperfectly communicated to Presiding Officers and other election staff, thereby creating administrative confusion.
- We received numerous reports of irregularities and saw direct evidence of some. In a number of different areas, social pressure was exerted by traditional and community leaders and party agents on those casting their votes. Many of these procedural irregularities are the subject of formal complaint and investigation and have yet to be resolved.
- An extension of polling hours and an additional voting day were necessary in certain selected areas where failures in the delivery of supplies and other preparations deprived voters of considerable voting time. However, in our view, all who were qualified to vote and wished to do so were able to cast their ballots.
- Problems with the transport and the storage of ballot boxes appeared to result from poor co-ordination between District Electoral Officers and the officers functioning under them. Allegations of malpractice in certain instances in the distribution of materials as well as the handling of ballot boxes are being investigated.
- The counting of the votes proved to be a lengthy process, with only a third of the results having been declared three days after the close of the poll. Difficulties in the reconciliation of ballot papers contributed to the delays.

### **Performance**

- Against the background of negotiations to draw those boycotting the elections into the fold, the Chairman of the IEC and his Commissioners demonstrated both creativity and flexibility in facilitating the consequential changes. Such flexibility was typified by the IFP stickers which made it possible for the party to be represented on the ballot papers and thus to contest the elections.
- The great majority of voting officials carried out their duties with dedication and efficiency. A number of them displayed great initiative and ingenuity in overcoming logistical problems and ensuring that voting continued without interruption. Undoubtedly, there were inconsistencies but these were rarely sufficient to compromise the overall integrity of the voting process.
- The security presence in most areas was visible and adequate to the task. During the period of the election campaign, including voting and the count, the security forces were generally perceived to have behaved

impartially and responsibly. They undoubtedly made a creditable and positive contribution. So too did the National Peace Secretariat and their Peace Monitors.

### **The Media**

- The media in South Africa has undergone considerable change. Not only was it subject to an unprecedented degree of scrutiny and regulation during the election period, but it undertook with enthusiasm a creative and constructive role in facilitating free political debate, promoting voter education, and encouraging democratic freedoms, including a sense of fair play among the various parties.
- We recognise the importance of national and local radio which provided the most effective means of communicating information about elections to those living in the least accessible regions of the country. Radio was crucial to the dissemination of news of the late participation of the IFP in the elections, as well as in many other ways.

### **General Conclusions**

- For the majority of South Africans, the elections were more than the exercise of democratic choice. Marked by the determined and patient way in which people voted, they were a celebration of freedom which sealed the final demise of apartheid.
- In the final analysis, the elections represented a free and clear expression of the will of the South African people. The outcome was the result of a credible democratic process which was substantially fair. We do not believe that abuses were widespread or had a determinative impact on the overall result. We are confident that the new South African Government will want to reinforce impartial and independent mechanisms for analysing these difficulties in preparing for the next elections. In nurturing the culture of democracy, there is much to say in favour of maintaining a mechanism for organising and conducting future elections which is perceived to be impartial and independent of government structures.