Chapter 5
The Poll and Count

The Poll

Polling was due to take place over a two-week period, between 14 and 28 June. In some provinces it was scheduled for one day only – for instance, on 16 June in the National Capital District, covering the capital Port Moresby, and on 17 June in the second city, Lae. In the Highlands, accounting for around half the population, voting in the Western Highlands Province was due to take place on 16 June, in Simbu and the Eastern Highlands on 18 June, in the Southern Highlands on 21 June and in Enga Province on 23 June. Elsewhere voting was staggered throughout the election fortnight, with teams of election officials moving from place to place, though at any one polling booth it was planned that voting would take place on one day only.

This arrangement enabled the Electoral Commission to make the best use of its limited resources. To have held the elections on the same day everywhere would have required a vast increase in the number of polling teams and the resources required would have been immense, especially given the difficult terrain of much of the country. In the Highlands one-day voting enabled the security forces to be concentrated for maximum effect.

The Opening of the Poll

Our teams were in place several days ahead of voting, in order to familiarise themselves with the provinces to be covered. On the first day on which voting took place in their province they were ready early to observe the opening procedure at polling booths. However, few of the booths that we visited opened at the scheduled time of 8 a.m. In some places the officials were ready but they only started the process once most of the voters were present. In many others either the officials were late, essential materials failed to arrive on time, necessary items (such as tables and other furniture) had to be found or there was some other reason for a late start. Sometimes voting started very late and in some electorates it could not begin until the day after it was due to take place. On the first day of the polling period delays in the printing of ballot papers led to the postponement of voting in some electorates.

As time went on more problems were reported. In parts of the country the schedule had to be amended and rearranged. However, even where this allowed for additional preparation time, delays still occurred. Helicopters failed to turn up on time to take polling teams to remote areas, supplies of ballot papers were inadequate and polling booths opened late even when they were only a relatively short distance from Electoral Commission offices in provincial capitals.

We noted the deep disappointment of voters in some areas who had turned out in large numbers at the right time and the right place in the justifiable expectation that the polling booths would be there too. It was no surprise that the voters were not always able to remain calm, patient and forbearing.

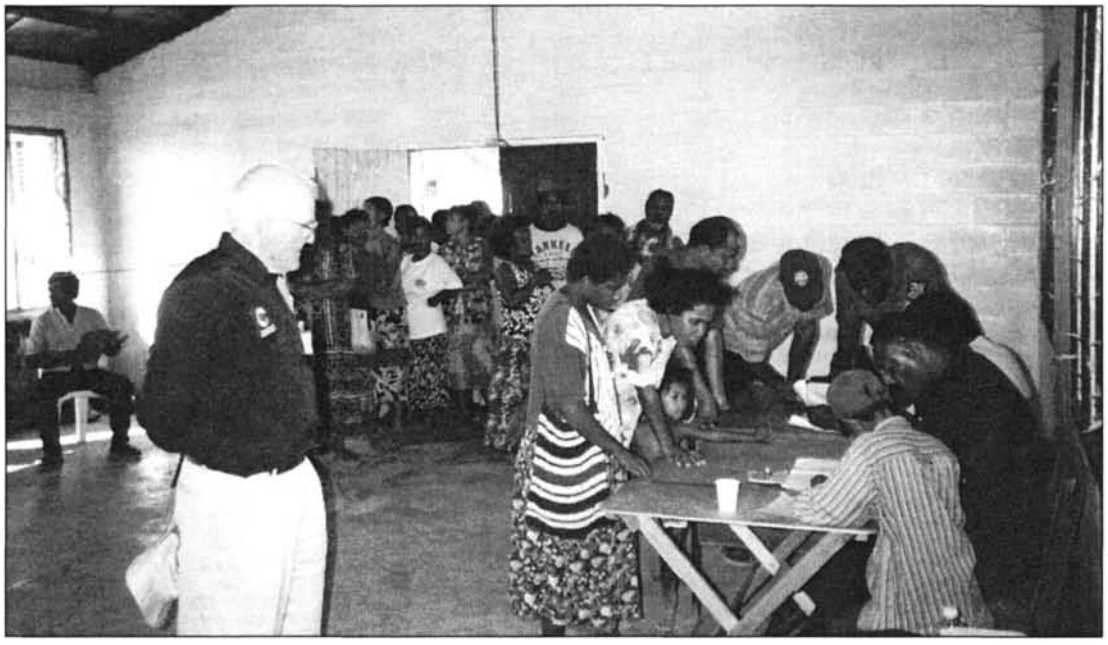
Voting Arrangements

Everywhere the process was transparent and in most places the procedures were properly implemented. However, there were marked variations in practice in different parts of the country. In some rural areas whole communities gathered and waited, sometimes for very long periods, then came up one by one as the names on the Common Roll were called out. In others electors were able to vote on a 'first-come, first-served' basis, once their names were found and marked off on the Roll. No use appeared to have been made of the voter number system, under which a voter can quote a number allowing ready access to her/his name in the list.

Each elector's little finger was marked with indelible ink, as a safeguard against double-voting. They were each handed two ballot papers – one for the election of the MP to represent

Arriving ... an enthusiastic group of supporters arriving at a polling booth

Under scrutiny ... before voting began Presiding Officers sealed the ballot box in the presence of the candidates' representatives, known as 'scrutineers'



On the list ... the one consistent complaint concerned the register, known in Papua New Guinea as the Common Roll: here officials search for electors' names while Commonwealth Observer Group Chairperson Sir Robin Gray looks on

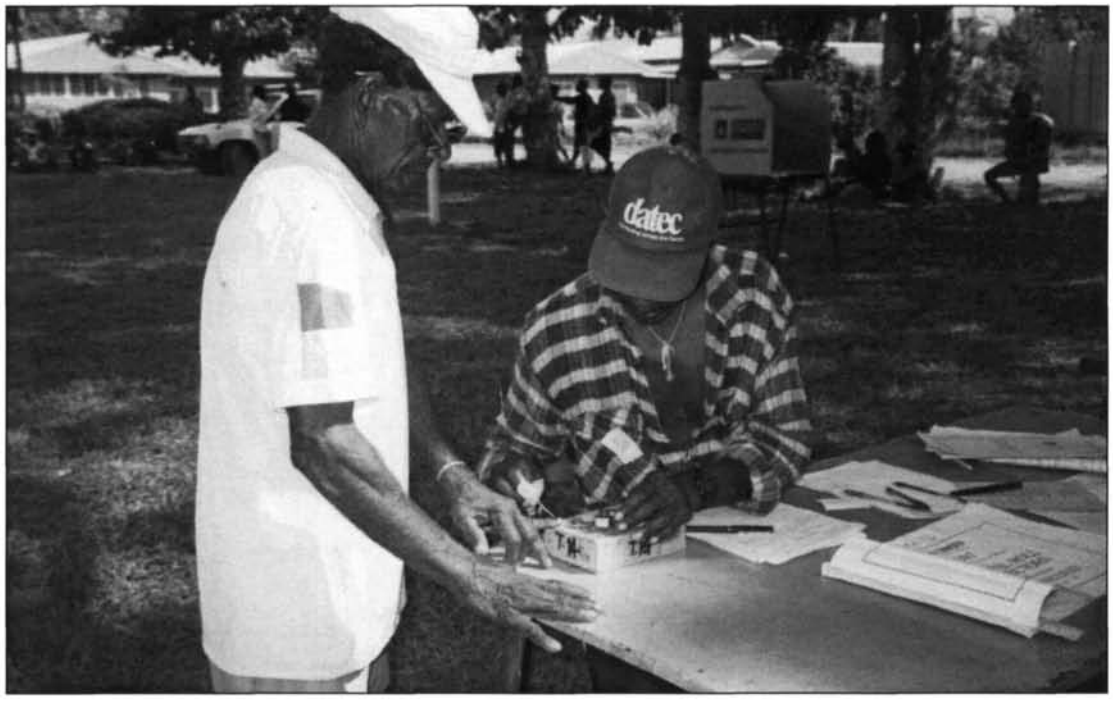
the electorate in which the elector was registered (known as the 'Open Electorate') and another for an MP to represent the Province as a whole (known as the 'Provincial Electorate'). It was not obligatory to take two ballot papers or to mark both. The law prohibited the removal of ballot papers from the polling booth. Each ballot paper bore the names and photographs of the candidates and, in the case of party-endorsed candidates, the name of their party and the photograph of their party leader. Independents were identified as such. Specimen ballot papers are at *Annexes XI* and *XII*. Not all were printed properly. In at least one case mistakes were made with candidates' photographs.

Usually the procedure began with the marking of the register, the application of indelible ink and the presentation of the ballot papers, though in some places the sequence differed. We were informed of some cases of double-voting.

Arrangements and facilities at the polling booths varied. Many booths were well equipped and properly laid out. Others were less impressive. They were almost always sited out of doors, which meant that the process was commendably transparent – though it posed difficulties when it rained and relocation indoors was impossible, in which case voting sometimes had to be suspended.

The location of the booths was not always as well thought out as it might have been and several of our teams came across instances where there were too many voters per booth – in one case as many as 1,800. In several places additional booths would have helped. The employment of additional staff, relevant to the number of electors, would also have made it unnecessary for councillors and other 'helpers' to participate in the organisation of the polling process, sometimes handling ballot papers. It would also have ensured that all Presiding Officers could oversee the process effectively: at many polling booths we visited in the Highlands, and some elsewhere, the Presiding Officer was directly engaged in the mechanics of the process and to that extent was unable to 'preside' effectively.

Voters generally seemed to be not only serious in their motivation and enthusiastic about the event but also well aware of the procedures. The polling booths were in any case well provided with sample ballot papers and information notices – in pidgin, English and sometimes the local language – and Presiding Officers or local leaders in many places addressed the voters to ensure that they knew the procedures whether or not they had read the posters. However,



Deterrence ... indelible ink was used to show that an elector had voted: practice varied, but normally it was applied – as here in East Sepik – to the little finger

voters were sometimes at the wrong booth and had to visit several in an effort to find the right one. We were surprised to find that there was a discrepancy between the legal provision that a voter could cast her/his ballot at any booth in the electorate, and the requirement on the day that this should be done at a specified booth.

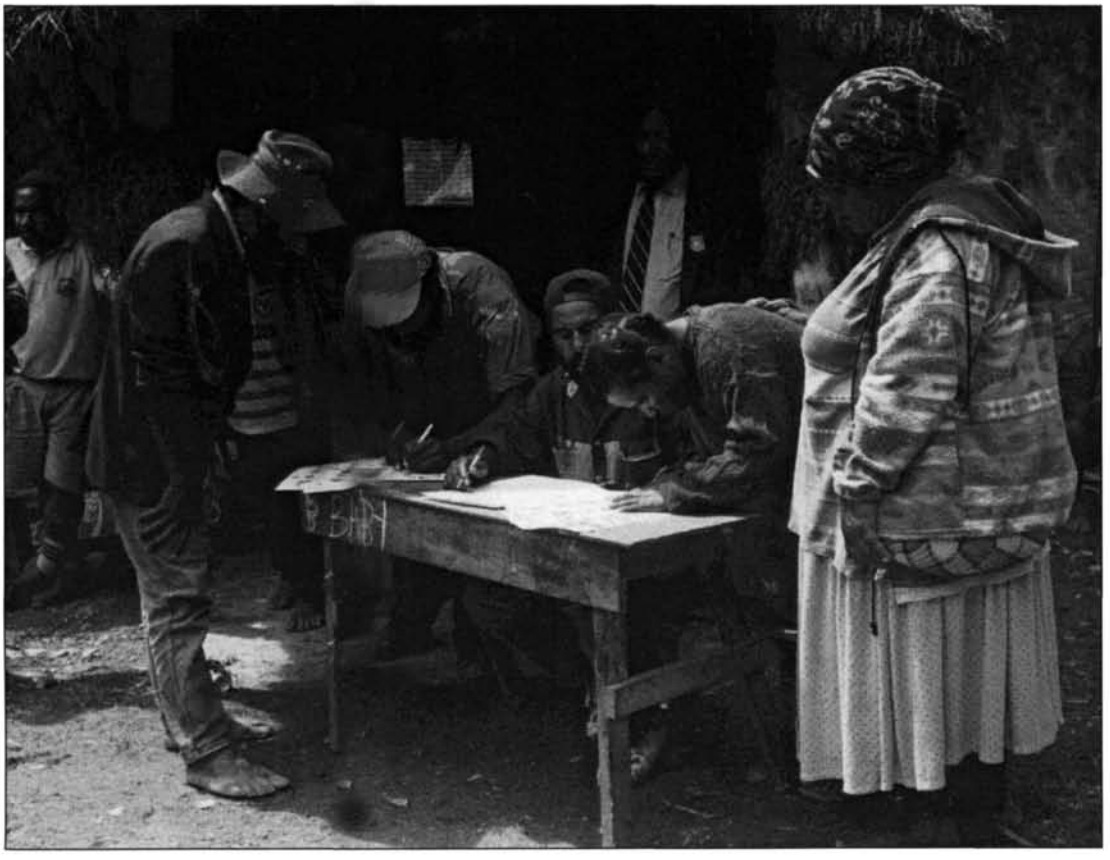
We noticed that in some places the rule preventing candidates from displaying their posters very near the polling booth itself was being ignored. However, the scrutineers and the voters rarely objected.

The Common Roll

The one consistent complaint concerned the Common Roll. It was alleged that there was both under-registration in particular areas and overall over-registration. We were told of 'ghost-names', double registration and dramatic increases in the size of the Common Roll in particular electorates. In one electorate the numbers on the roll had increased by over 50 per cent since the 1992 general election. Voters insisted that they had registered but had been turned away at the polling booths because their names were not on the Roll. The figures alone suggest that in some parts of the country investigation by the Electoral Commission and an examination of registration procedures are both merited.

Our own observations during the polling period revealed an extremely uneven picture. In the same area it was possible to find evidence of effective registration while nearby the opposite was the case. It appeared that this unevenness was due to the quality and ability of those responsible for compiling the roll. In some rural areas the Village Recorders had produced rolls which included all those residents who had voted in 1992 as well as the newly qualified: the same was true in some urban areas. In other areas we came across people who claimed long residence and participation in previous elections but who were not enrolled. Despite election awareness efforts many people in senior positions, some of whom played a role as election officials, were unaware of the need to register for the general election. Polling officials told us that names which they were sure they had submitted properly had been omitted from the roll. In some of the rolls we saw names were listed more than once – on occasions up to three or four times. Presiding Officers used their discretion in such cases. Some people complained that

X marks the spot ... while in much of the country voting compartments were used and the ballot was genuinely secret (above), in parts of the Highlands, for instance, there was no screening and it was not (below)



In the box ... all smiles as this voter puts her voting papers in the ballot box: in most places the polling procedures were implemented properly – polling officials were diligent and the people participated eagerly

their names had been so badly misspelled or transcribed as to be virtually unrecognisable.

We discovered that in some cases Presiding Officers who had disallowed a large number of apparently qualified persons from voting (because they were not on the roll) then resorted to the use of the 1992 Roll. This reduced the number of rejections. One result of this was that the time taken to process the voters was extended to ten or 12 minutes per voter, with consequent delays and crowding. This had a knock-on effect into the late afternoon and the subsequent denial of the vote to persons waiting outside the voting enclosure at the close of the polls.

The format and presentation of the roll was not uniform in style or content. Voters were sometimes grouped in alphabetical order in residential zones or villages. In other cases the listing seemed to have no particular order. This was frustrating for the voter, especially in places where 'first-come, first-served' was the practice, and the polling officials had to spend a great deal of time trying to find names, searching for them in one block of names after another. The patience of the people in these situations was admirable. In villages the lack of an alphabetical ordering was not such a problem, since voters were called up in order and often appeared to be happy to wait their turn.

The problems caused by the organisation of the roll were compounded by the fact that many people in Papua New Guinea do not use a uniform family name. In urban areas some people claiming a vote appeared not to be able to recognise the address where they were registered. In such cases they were either denied the vote or directed to another booth. It was not possible to discover whether the problem of identifying voters was due to the fact that they were not qualified, were confused or had been misplaced on the roll.

Voters by Group and the Secrecy of the Ballot

Illiterate voters were allowed to take a helper to the voting compartment to assist them, although in many cases the Presiding Officer, another polling official or even a police officer performed this task – sometimes at the insistence of the scrutineers. Where a helper assisted the voter – for instance in rural areas, where the numbers of illiterate voters were greatest –

we noticed that the same person sometimes made repeated visits to the polling booth accompanied by a different voter each time. This gave rise to the suspicion that these helpers could have been working for a particular candidate and that they were ensuring that voters cast their ballot for that candidate. In some places more than one 'helper' attempted to accompany the voter. Voters may be well aware that they are free to choose whoever they wish to accompany and assist them. However, it might help for there to be greater publicity of this fact before and on polling day itself.

The polling officials kept a 'sex tally' so that they would be able to monitor the number of voters by gender and thereby enable the Electoral Commission to know whether women were participating in the process as fully as men. It appeared that they were. Women voters turned out in large numbers and in many cases there were more female than male voters.

We were also told that clan affiliations would influence voting patterns, with every member expected to support a particular candidate. Although it is clear that such influences are stronger in some places than in others, there was often strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that traditional group loyalty is still a powerful factor in elections in Papua New Guinea.

While in much of the country the ballot was genuinely secret, in parts of the Highlands, for instance, it was not. Voting compartments or screens were not used, so voting was not done in private: the ballot paper was marked at a table within sight of anyone who cared to watch.

In some places it was considered acceptable for minors to vote. While some officials and voters were robust in their opposition to attempted under-age voting, in certain electorates polling officials took the view that this was permissible as long as the scrutineers did not object and the name of the child in question appeared on the Common Roll.

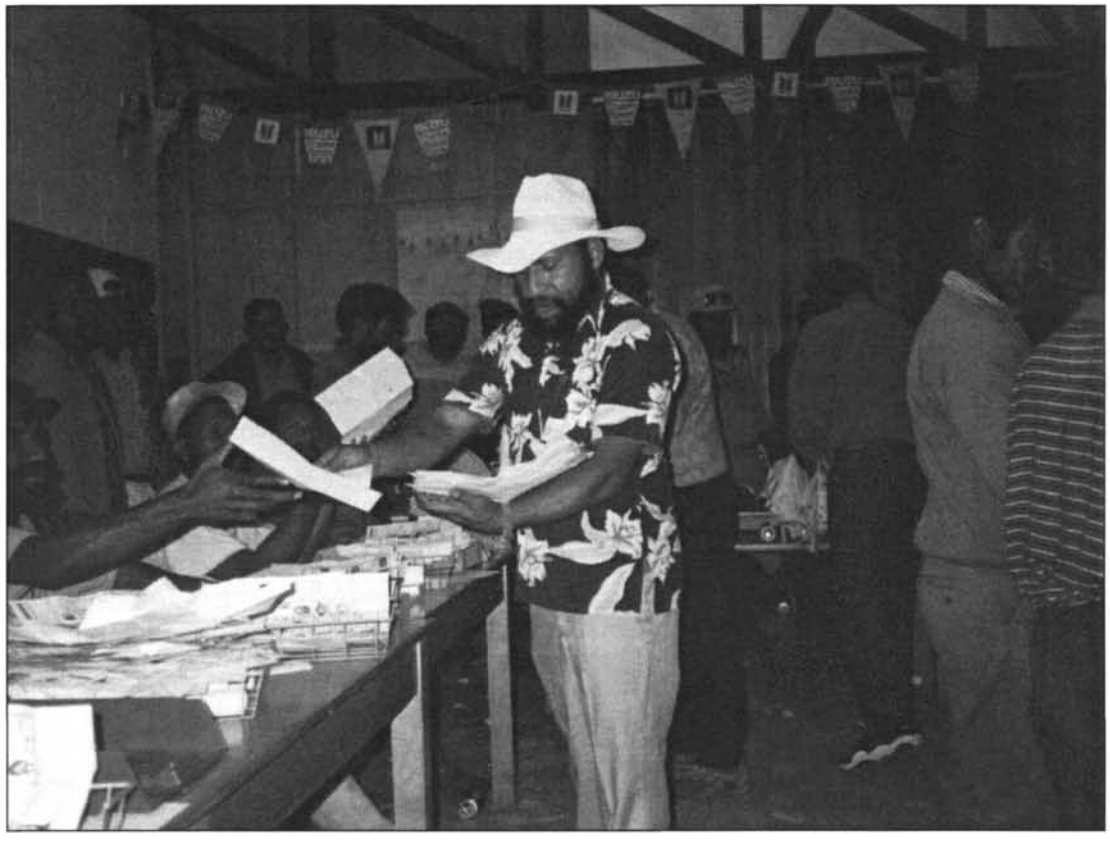
Scrutineers, Polling Officials and Police

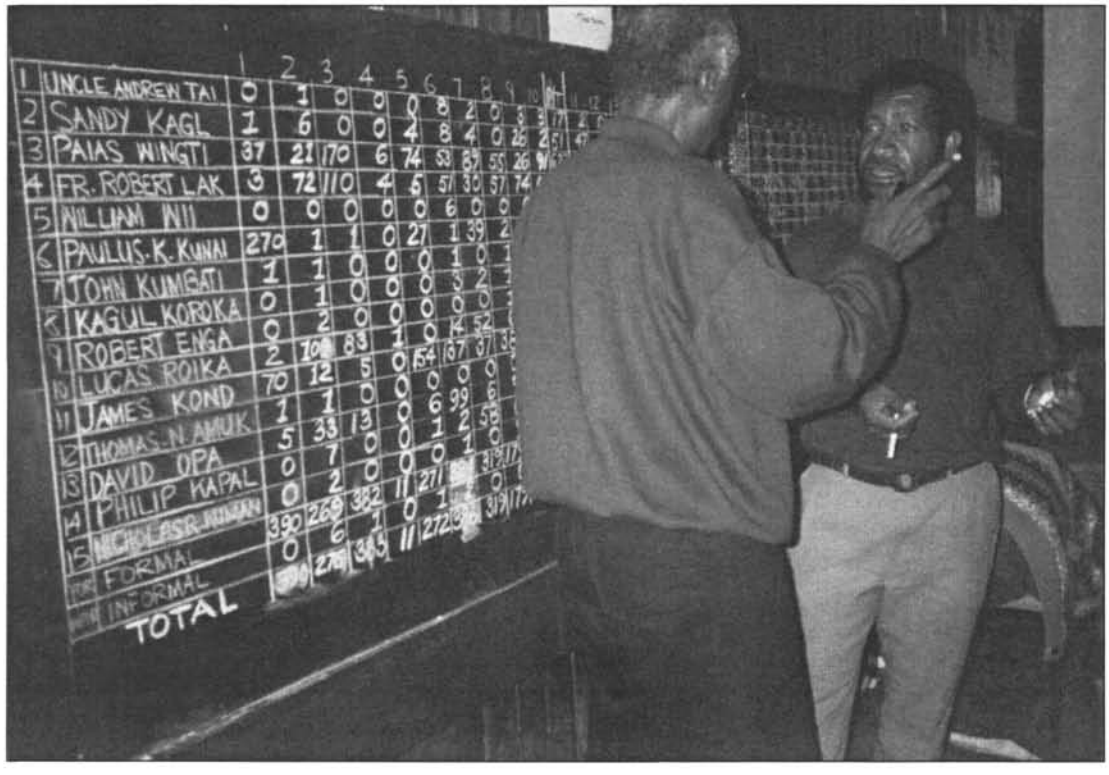
Scrutineers, each representing a particular candidate, were present at all the polling booths visited. Their role was to observe the process and to object if procedures were not being followed. In some cases they proved to be knowledgeable and vigilant. In others they would have benefited from more thorough preparation and training. In only a few cases did they express dissatisfaction with the process. In the best cases, and there were many of them, we noted a good relationship between the scrutineers and the polling staff and with one another.

The majority of Presiding Officers and polling staff were efficient and diligent even when they were under great pressure. Many of them were 'old hands' with very effective techniques, especially in the rural areas. Some officials were young, but they learned fast and their inexperience was often balanced by the presence of other experienced officials. In a number of cases the officials showed great courage in resisting pressure to allow a breach of procedure, although unfortunately in some – especially where police were not present – this was not the case. On other occasions, the officials seemed not to be aware that irregularities were taking place. Almost everywhere the voters appeared to trust them. They often showed great ingenuity in making *ad hoc* arrangements, for instance in the use of local materials to make improvised voting compartments. Except in the Highlands, where many officials did not even wear badges, polling officials were easily identified by their T-shirts (which were marked 'Election Official').

Security at polling booths was provided by one or more, usually unarmed, police officers. Mobile teams of other, armed, officers – in some areas supported by soldiers of the Papua New Guinea Defence Force – were held in reserve to be deployed if required. The police officers we met were invariably helpful to voters and Commonwealth Observers alike. In most cases they clearly enjoyed the confidence of the voters and were effective in ensuring security for both people and process.

However, there were not always sufficient police to ensure one at every polling booth. And even where police were present this was not always enough to prevent sometimes serious election offences. We were informed by the police that at this general election, as at previous ones, there were instances of ballot boxes being stolen, the abduction of polling teams, the destruction of ballot papers and sometimes serious disorder. Such incidents were well publicised in the national media.





At the count ... an election official sorts ballot papers by candidate at a count in the Western Highlands (above); the progress of the count was recorded ballot box-by-ballot box on blackboards fixed to the counting centre walls (below)

However, where the police were unable to prevent such occurrences robust follow-up action was undertaken. And in areas that were thought likely to be troublesome, large contingents of security force personnel were deployed as a deterrent. Such precautionary deployment – well publicised in advance – helped to ensure greater calm on polling day than might otherwise have been expected. We were deeply impressed by the organisation, discipline, professionalism and competence of the police and their determination to uphold the democratic rights of their fellow citizens. We should also state that the Group was struck by the contrast, almost everywhere, between the image of a violent Papua New Guinea and the reality which we experienced.

The Closure

The closure sometimes came quite early in the day, with officials and scrutineers taking the view that it was unnecessary for the polling booth to remain open when all the voters on their list had cast their ballots. At other places many voters had still to exercise their franchise at 6 p.m. Often this was caused by the late opening, sometimes by the sheer numbers of voters on the list. Often both factors were combined. Always this occasioned frustration, and sometimes worse, especially when those who had yet to vote had seen members of other clans vote while their own had had to wait. Where the numbers of voters still to participate justified it Presiding Officers announced that polling would continue the next day. But in some places Presiding Officers did not allow voters who were in the queue at 6 p.m. to be processed that day or the next, in clear contravention of our understanding of the rules.

We encountered few objections to the way in which the closure procedure was implemented and there was general confidence that the ballot boxes would be well looked after between the end of the poll and the beginning of the count.

The Count

The count was not conducted at the polling booth itself but at specially designated counting centres (usually in the provincial capital, but sometimes in the district headquarters town). It was only allowed to begin once all the ballot boxes in the electorate were gathered in. These were normally stored at police stations prior to the count. Sometimes large crowds gathered outside the police stations, both to witness the return of the boxes and to mount a vigil until the count began. Crowds were also to be seen outside counting centres, although police usually managed to keep them well back when the counting got under way.

The Procedure

The boxes were opened one at a time and the papers sorted first into piles for the 'Open Electorate' and for the 'Provincial Seat', and then by candidate. At all times the candidates' scrutineers were able to observe the process at close quarters, and good order was maintained. The ballot papers were counted and recounted to ensure that there was no possibility of error and the numbers for each candidate were recorded on boards lining the walls of the counting centre.

Periodically sub-totals were calculated and the media informed of the progressive tally, so that they could in turn inform the general public. Apart from enabling the process to be as transparent as possible, given that the public could not be admitted to the counting centre itself, the media's periodic bulletins on the course of the count probably had a positive effect in places where anticipation of the result might have triggered trouble. They enabled the supporters of particular candidates to adjust to the likely outcome over a period, which was probably a preferable alternative to a sudden announcement.

Assessment

All the counts we witnessed were thorough and correct, though the scrupulousness of the procedure, the limitations imposed by the often small size of the counting rooms, frequent

suspensions caused by challenges from vigilant scrutineers and the relatively small number of counters employed meant that the process took a very long time. In some places it was further prolonged by extensive breaks to enable the counting teams to rest, whereas employment of additional counting teams could have enabled the process to be continuous and therefore quicker. Some of our Observers were concerned that where the counting was continuous too few shifts of counters were used, so that they became over-tired. Others argued that by proceeding a box at a time the process enabled the candidates' scrutineers to detect 'disloyalty' on the part of certain groups of voters. On the latter point we suggest that the Electoral Commission might consider amending arrangements so that the voting of particular communities cannot be easily identified. This might be done, for instance, by ensuring that the contents of ballot boxes are mixed before counting. We also believe that counting more than one box at a time would speed up the process. In general, however, we were impressed by the count. The counters were efficient and the process well managed.

Results

In each provincial capital a central 'Tally Centre' kept track of the progress at each count. Outside scoreboards were erected to enable the public to see all the results once they had been declared. Declarations were sometimes followed by serious violence as one set of supporters exacted revenge on voters believed to have voted the 'wrong' way. However, the extent of such disturbances appears to have been more limited than had been feared, even in areas with a reputation for uproar.

Comments

The Electoral Commission was confronted by formidable logistical difficulties. We were told that they had received less money than requested and that there had been problems in transmission of the required amounts on time. This caused last-minute problems, for instance in the hiring of helicopters, the payment of allowances to election officials and the purchase of necessary items. However, these factors do not explain all the problems that were encountered during the polling period. We were disappointed at the scale and effect of the shortcomings in planning and organisation and we believe that the Electoral Commission must consider its management of the arrangements in good time for the next general election. It should also revise the system of registration so that an accurate Common Roll is in place prior to the next general election, or sooner if possible, and improve arrangements for the secrecy of the ballot, which as we have noted above was not assured in some parts of the country.

The Commission should also have more staff, especially at provincial level where it has to rely too much on the provincial administration rather than its own officers. Inevitably, the organisation of a general election will require assistance from provincial administration officials. But it is absolutely necessary that the Commission should have more staff. At headquarters there should be additional professional staff, particularly in logistics and information technology. And there should be an office in each province with additional permanent core staff, especially to deal with registration. An increase in funding – not only immediately before the elections, when transmission must be timely, but over the entire period between elections – would, we believe, result in greater efficiency and better organised elections. We believe that the Commission should be funded directly from parliamentary appropriations.

Despite the logistical and organisational difficulties experienced this year, we believe that it should be possible, in time, for Papua New Guinea to hold countrywide one-day elections and that the Electoral Commission should continue to move in this direction.

Finally, we commend the voters not only for their patience and fortitude but also, and above all, for their enthusiastic engagement in the process and their determination to express their democratic rights.