

Chapter 3

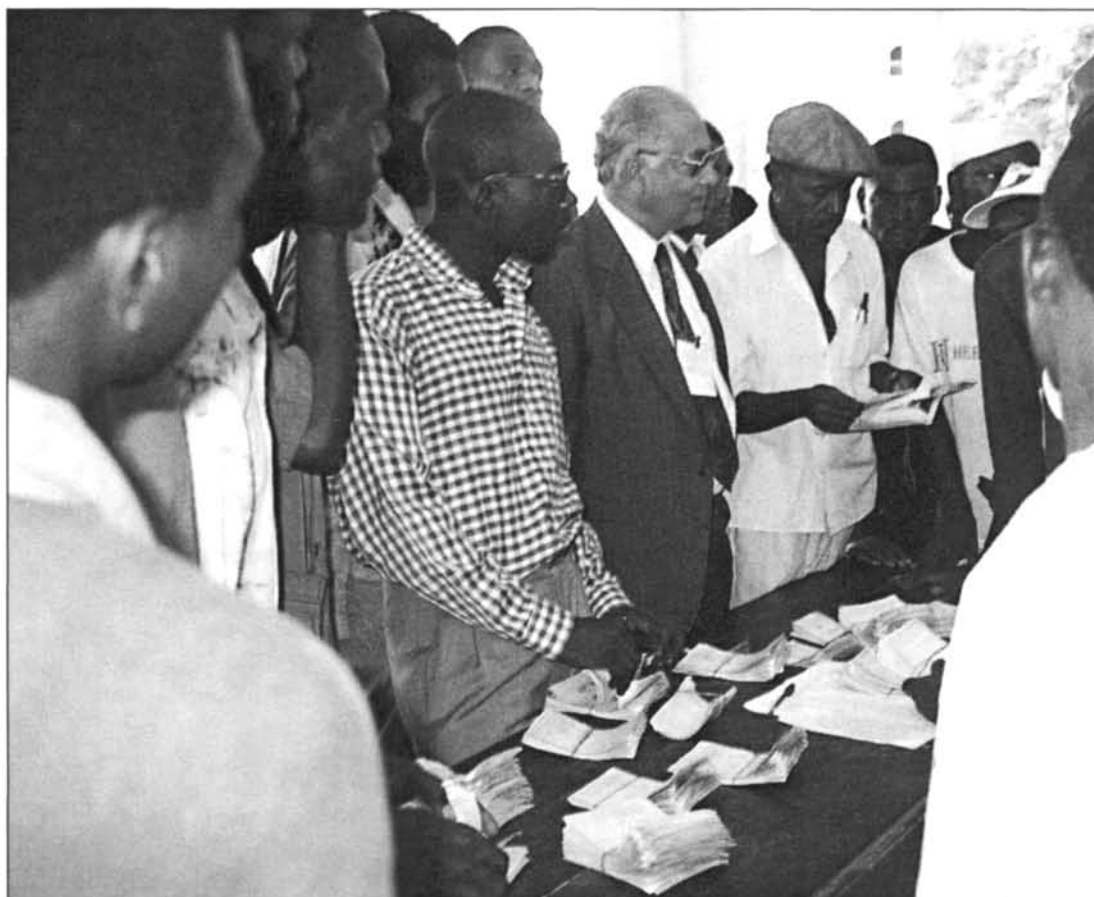
Preparations for the Elections

Registration of Voters and the Electoral Register

Voter registration and preparation of the voters' register are fundamental to the conduct of a credible election. In Cameroon, a register of electors is compiled at the divisional level with a separate register for each polling station. An important qualification for registration is that an elector has to be aged 20 years or more, and to have resided in the sub-district for at least six months.

We found that voters' registers were generally not available for public scrutiny three days before the poll as required by law and that Local Polling Commissions did not receive their copies of the register until the morning of the elections or late on the evening before. Thus, both the voters themselves and polling officials who had the task of checking the register against the names of voters as they came in to vote, were seeing the register for the first time. Very few polling stations had additional copies for public reference.

Each voter should be allocated a registration number which appears on her/his voter's card. The register should be revised annually beginning on 1 January but registration ceases with effect from the date an election is declared. In the case of the 17 May 1997 elections to the National Assembly, registration which began after the municipal elections



Cards, cards, cards ... Commonwealth Observer Rezaul Karim (centre) talks to electoral officials and voters who had gathered at a Yaoundé Divisional Office to collect their voter registration cards

of January 1996 ceased as of 2 April 1997, the date the President called the elections.

We were informed by MINAT that there was a total of 3,719,774 eligible voters on the register. Having regard to the size of the population of 14 million as estimated from the census of 1987, one would have expected the number of voters to have been substantially higher. The number of voters also showed a drop of some 300,000 from the number of voters who were on the register used for the municipal elections in January 1996.

Acknowledging the low level of registration, MINAT explained that the register had been purged of names that had unlawfully appeared on it, including those of deceased persons and foreigners. It was also suggested that voter apathy may have played a role in the low registration and that many people made no effort to register or only did so after the declaration of the poll when, by law, the register had closed.

The preparation of the register had been completed before our arrival and, therefore, we had little opportunity to observe its preparation at first hand. We received many complaints from political parties, organisations and individuals that the register was seriously flawed. In particular, there were complaints that:

- (a) the dates and times of registration were inadequately publicised and the registration was often at inconvenient times and places;
- (b) after registration, names did not appear on the register;
- (c) some names appeared on registers other than at places where they registered;
- (d) representations to the authorities about rectification of the register were generally not acted upon;
- (e) the details in the register sometimes differed from the details on the national identity card or the voter's card;
- (f) applications to register were not always entered on the proper registration forms;
- (g) names appeared on the register of people who did not live in that locality;
- (h) some people were registered at more than one location;
- (i) registration was refused to people who had no certificate of residence;
- (j) in many instances, people were hindered rather than helped to register as voters;
- (k) the receipts for application to register were not accepted as proof of registration or not given at all.

These complaints were compounded by the fact that voters were not given the opportunity to scrutinise the register before polling day. As a result, in the run-up to polling day, many voters were uncertain as to whether they could vote and, if so, at which polling station.

Another factor of uncertainty was the considerable increase in the number of polling stations from the 13,817 used for the January 1996 municipal elections to 16,010 for the parliamentary elections. We were informed by MINAT that the increase in the number of polling stations was a result of the decision to reduce the number of voters per polling station from 800 to a maximum of 500 in order to prevent congestion.

Distribution of Voters' Registration Cards

The revised electoral law provides that each registered voter shall be issued with a registration card, containing personal details corresponding to their National ID Card for the purposes of identification. To be able to vote, voters had to prove their identity and show their voters' cards. However, the law also provided that the Local Polling Commission had discretion to allow voters to vote without a voter's card provided they were on the register and could prove their identity.

We were repeatedly told by political parties, organisations and individuals that a large number of those who had registered had not received their registration cards prior to polling day. There were allegations that this was a deliberate policy on the part of district officials. It was also alleged that the voters' cards, instead of being held at Divisional offices for collection, were often entrusted to traditional chiefs and other unauthorised persons for distribution.

MINAT acknowledged that with only one week to polling day, a substantial number of voters' registration cards remained to be distributed. The Vice-Prime Minister had asked all

officers to accelerate this process and said that everything would continue to be done to ensure that as many as possible of the remaining cards were distributed before polling day. Provision was made for those cards that still remained unclaimed by their owners to be deposited for collection at the relevant polling stations on election morning. The Vice-Prime Minister also assured us that he would issue instructions to make it clear that voters whose names were on the register but who did not have a voter's card should be allowed to vote on producing their National ID Card; and that radio announcements would be made to advise voters who had not received their cards to collect t

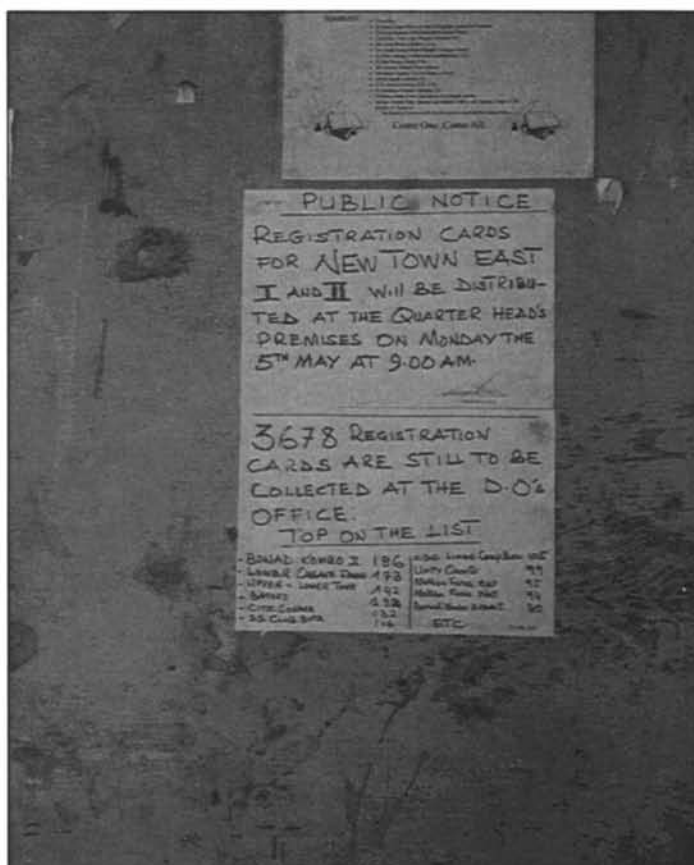
Nominations

Political parties wishing to contest seats in a constituency are required under the electoral law to submit a candidate or list of their candidates for the constituency, together with a list of alternate names to the SDO of the constituency concerned not later than 40 days before elections. In the case of the parliamentary elections, declared on 2 April for 17 May, this meant that lists of candidates had to be submitted within a period of five days only. The SDO is required, within seven days of receipt of a list, to decide on whether it is in conformity with the law. If the list is rejected, the SDO is required to state the reasons for so doing and to inform the Divisional Supervisory Commission. The SDO must, in any event, forward the list to the Minister responsible for Territorial Administration within ten days from the date it was received.

The decision of the SDO to accept or to reject a candidate or list may be challenged in the Supreme Court within five days of notification of the rejection and the Supreme Court then has 15 days to rule on the appeal. In the 1997 parliamentary elections, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of six appeals that came before it resulting in either the reinstatement of the candidates concerned, or leave being granted to a party to substitute another person.

The law further provides that the Minister responsible for Territorial Administration is to publish the list of all candidates for election not later than 20 days before the poll. The full list of candidates for the elections should thus have been published by 27 April 1997. In fact, it was not published until 7 May.

Some opposition parties complained about the short period of time allowed for the



submission of lists and about the manner in which their lists were processed, alleging that they were not informed until the last moment as to whether or not their lists had been accepted. It was also alleged that in some cases no reason was given for rejections. The Ministry of Territorial Administration explained that it had tried to accommodate the deficiencies in the lists submitted by some of the political parties and had been flexible in regard to the dates although how that flexibility was demonstrated was not explained.

Voter Education and Training of Officials

Although the state-owned daily newspaper published extracts from the electoral law, and MINAT issued a calendar in February 1997, attempts to educate the public in the electoral process appeared to be grossly inadequate. We saw little evidence of any real public education programme aimed at the illiterate and were unable to confirm from our observations how widely accessible or comprehensible this public education was.

In the later stages of the campaign there were television and radio broadcasts explaining the electoral process. We saw few posters, leaflets or other materials to promote civic education and to widen public appreciation of democratic processes.

We learned of seminars for training officials to carry out subsequent training sessions. Under a programme of technical assistance from the Canadian Government, a manual had been produced in conjunction with MINAT and the Advanced Institute of Public Management as a guide for officials and political agents and, along with materials produced by other local agencies, was commonly used for training during the days immediately prior to polling. Many of us observed training sessions which were well conducted and well attended.

Domestic Observer Groups

We were told that a nationwide programme for the training of some 2,000 or more domestic monitors had been cancelled at the eleventh hour by the Government. The reason given by MINAT for this was that the training and selection of participants would not be politically impartial. This meant that the number of independent local observers was greatly reduced and we encountered few local monitors on polling day.

We are aware, however, that MINAT accredited seven NGOs who fielded a total of some 600 local observers. These were:

- *Groupe d'Initiative Commune pour la Promotion de la Démocratie et la Défense des Droits de l'Homme (GIC-PRODHOM);*
- *Action des Chrétiens pour l'Abolition de la Torture (ACAT), Cameroun;*
- *L'Association des Droits de l'Homme – Mouvement National de Dialogue;*
- *Mouvement Humano-Culturel Camerounais (MOHUCA);*
- *Service Ecuménique pour la Paix et la Promotion Humaine (Service Humanus);*
- *L'Organisation Camerounaise des Droits et Libertés du Citoyen (OCDLC);*
- *Fondation France-Afrique (a mixed group of Cameroonian and French citizens).*