

Chapter 5

The Poll and Count

Five days before election day we deployed in two-member teams to each of Cameroon's ten provinces, and visited 43 constituencies/divisions. We met with provincial and local officials of MINAT responsible for the administration of the elections in their areas, and in some cases the Provincial Governor. We also met local party representatives, Divisional Supervisory Commissions, chiefs, representatives of local NGOs, and individuals with an interest in the political process, as well as with a wide cross-section of Cameroonian society. In virtually all cases, we were well received.

All these contacts assisted us in assessing the state of administrative preparedness at the local level for the 17 May poll, as well as offering an opportunity to hear first hand how the wider public viewed the electoral process.

Polling Day – 17 May 1997

On election day itself, we covered 350 polling stations, observing the opening of the poll, the casting of votes, the close of poll, the counting of ballots at polling stations and the onward despatch of Local Polling Commission reports through the SDOs to Divisional Supervisory Commissions.

The large majority of polling officials we encountered performed their duties in a commendable manner in often difficult and trying circumstances. However, a small minority appeared not to be familiar with the regulations pertaining to the elections or performed their duties in a partisan manner.

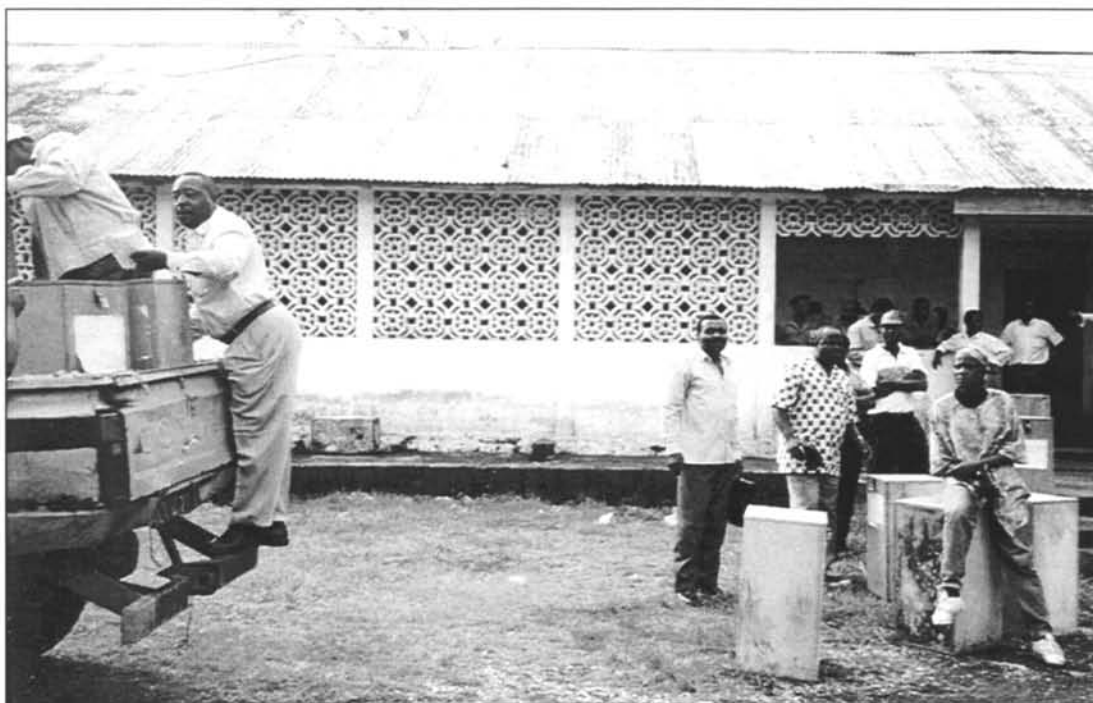


A 'pousse-pousse boy' ... is a young man who pushes ('pousser') a trolley for a living: this one is delivering some wooden ballot boxes to be used on polling day



Facilities varied ... two polling stations in the North Province on polling day





All aboard ... some election materials being loaded for distribution on the morning of 17 May, while others await transport

We were impressed by the general atmosphere of peace and calm which prevailed, and by the commitment of the people of Cameroon to the democratic process. At the same time, a number of the problems noted below created uncertainties and tensions on polling day.

The Polling Stations

Most of us had obtained a list of polling stations for our assigned areas in advance of polling day. In this, we were more privileged than most Cameroonian citizens and voters.

Where the location of polling stations had been changed, or been newly established (which was the case for some 3,000 new stations), the necessary information was not readily available. This lack of transparency gave rise to rumours and allegations of 'phantom' polling stations which we received from various sources but were not able to substantiate.

During our briefing sessions, we received complaints that in a number of areas, polling stations were sited in the private residences of local community leaders or traditional chiefs who were known to be supporters of particular political parties. It was alleged that this amounted to intimidation of voters. It proved from our observations that a very high proportion of polling stations were indeed located in the houses (*chefferies*) or compounds of local chiefs (*l'amidos*), and *chefs de quartier* in both urban and rural areas. In one division of the nation's capital all the polling stations were sited in or adjacent to *chefferies*; another team observed that of a total of 106 polling stations in a division, 28 were in chiefs' palaces; in yet another province, private residences (*sarés*) accounted for the majority of polling stations. One team witnessed the relocation of a polling station from a chief's palace to a public place on the morning of election day as a result of protests by the voters gathered.

The facilities available and the layout of polling stations varied widely. Some were arranged in very basic lean-to structures; others were situated in public buildings such as schools, canteens or lecture halls. In the vast majority of cases, the facilities available – however rudimentary – allowed for privacy and assured the secrecy of the ballot. However, some teams observed the presence of unauthorised persons, notably chiefs and accompanying retainers, inside polling stations.

Arrangements for the Security of Election Materials

Due attention was not always paid to the security and adequate storage of voting materials such as ballot boxes and ballot papers. In the most extreme case, one of our teams reported seeing a ballot box containing election materials left lying unattended at the roadside on polling morning.

The electoral law in Cameroon states that for every candidate or list of candidates the number of ballot papers to be printed should be equivalent to the number of the electors registered increased by 25 per cent. This means that each DO needed to be able to securely store hundreds of thousands of ballot papers, and ensure their safe distribution and despatch to each polling station.

Before entering the polling booth, each voter took or was handed a ballot paper for each party contesting the seat. (In one constituency there were as many as 14 candidates.) The voter was then required to cast a ballot by depositing one ballot paper in an envelope and discarding the rest. At the end of the counting process, valid ballots cast and discarded ballot papers are required to be burnt at the polling stations, while unused ballot papers are returned to divisional offices.

Before polling day we saw many 'loose' ballot papers in divisional offices. There were also 'loose' papers to be seen during and after polling day.

Opening of the Poll

Under the terms of the electoral law, polling stations were scheduled to open for polling at 8 a.m. Once materials and personnel had arrived, the procedures for opening of the poll were generally well understood by the polling officials and voters who had gathered in order to observe the opening. We noted that if the correct procedure was not followed, polling agents and waiting voters were particularly vigilant and immediately demanded that the situation be rectified.

However, in some cases for reasons beyond the control of the local polling commission delays in opening occurred. In one province, a team observed that heavy rains in the early morning of 17 May affected the distribution of polling materials to the stations in the provincial capital.

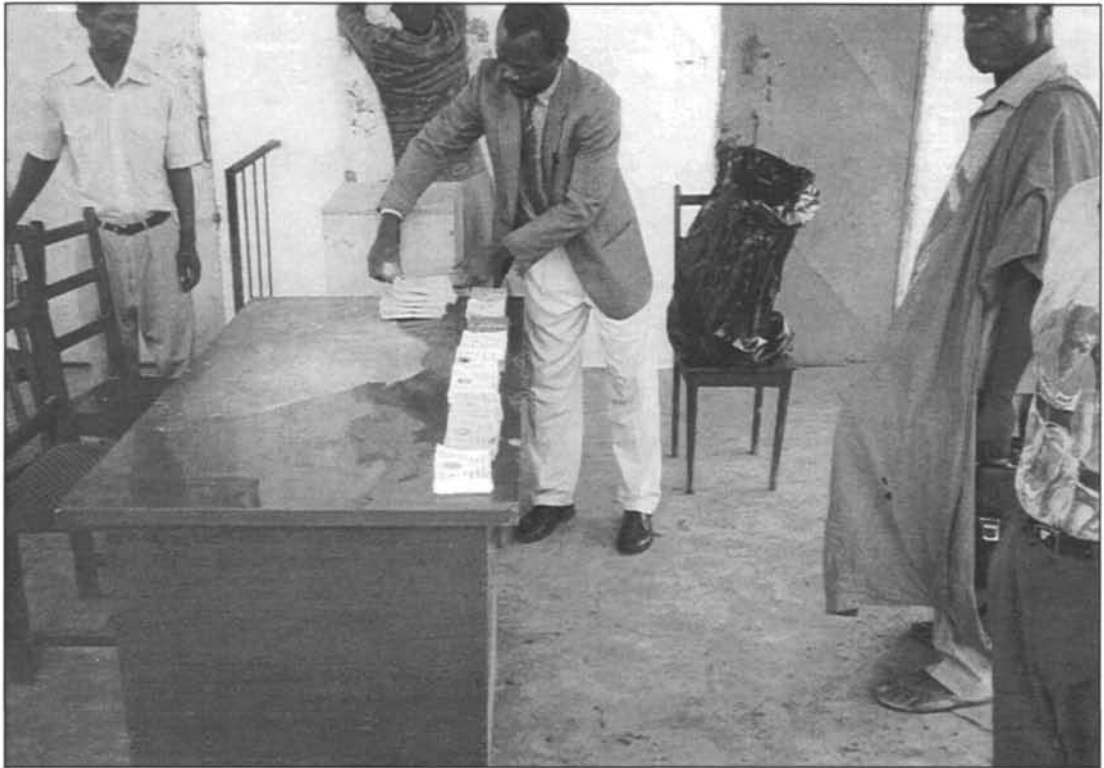
In another provincial capital, a team visited five polling stations between 7.30 a.m. and 8.45 a.m., none of which were ready for polling. On visiting the DO's office at 9 a.m., the team found 22 sets of polling materials, including ballot boxes and papers, still waiting to be conveyed to their respective stations. The DO explained that one party's ballot papers had not arrived on time and this had caused a delay in their preparations. This initial delay was then compounded by transportation difficulties and one station visited by the Observer team in that division did not open until 11.40 a.m. In another provincial capital, an Observer team received a reliable report of stations opening as late as 2.30 p.m. In other instances, delays were caused by the unavailability of Local Polling Commission members, in more than one instance because party representatives were denied access to the station for one reason or another.

In Maroua Rural Council Division, polling did not take place until the following day (18 May) as a result of an administrative oversight which had omitted it from inclusion within a constituency boundary when a special constituency was created by the 2 April decree. This omission was rectified by a presidential decree (No. 97-090). A second decree (No. 97-091) called the voters of Maroua Rural Council Division to vote on 18 May. Both decrees were issued on the night of 17 May, and as our team prepared to leave the province they observed polling taking place in this division.

The Casting of Votes

Given the nature and extent of the complaints we received before polling day, particular attention was paid to the actual ability of voters to exercise their franchise.

Most of our teams found confusion among voters on polling day, caused by uncertainty over whether citizens who had presented themselves for registration were actually on the



Down to business ... (above) the Chairperson of the Local Polling Commission lays out a pile of ballot papers for each party participating in the election ... (below) the empty ballot box is shown to voters before polling starts ... and (opposite) a lady casts her vote





register, and if they were, at which polling station they were supposed to cast their vote. This uncertainty was compounded by the fact that many people did not receive their voters' cards before polling day; and where new polling stations had been established, it was only on receipt of a voter's card, that an individual knew where they were expected to cast their vote. We have noted the difficulties created by this situation in Chapter 3.

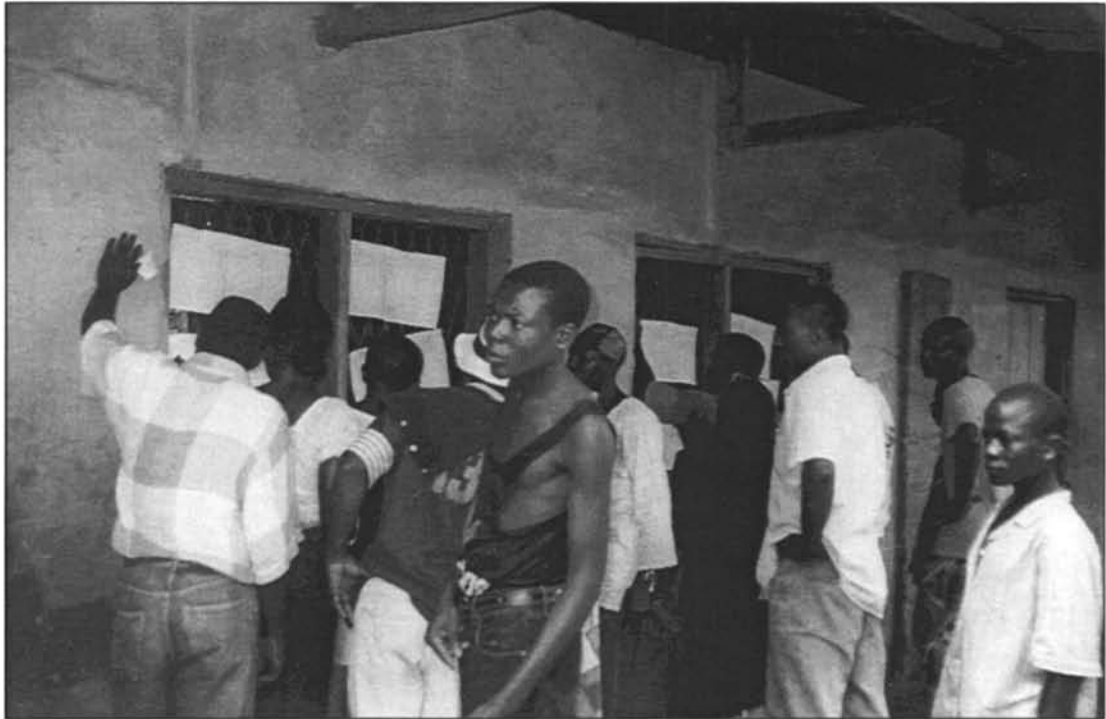
The issue of non-receipt of voters' cards prior to polling day was of particular concern. It was common at polling stations we visited to find a large number of cards waiting to be collected.

Indeed, a number of our teams encountered frustrated voters who had travelled some distance from where they were registered in search of their names at polling stations that they were not familiar with, and as late as 5 p.m. had had no success. Party agents were also seen travelling between stations informing those known to them where their cards were to be found. All this was against the background of a nationwide injunction on movement between towns, and localised restrictions on the movement of private vehicles on election day in certain areas.

Polling officials and members of the public alike voiced their frustration that those whose names appeared on the polling station lists were not known to them, whilst the people who had gathered outside their polling station they recognised as neighbours yet their names did not appear on the register. At a polling station we visited in the capital, not a single vote had been cast by 4 p.m. as no-one who had presented themselves by that time was on the list of voters at the station. In one polling station in a rural area among those who voted only five on a roll of 300 were said to have been recognised as being from that community. We also observed voters prevented from voting because of discrepancies between the details found on their national identity cards and those on their voter registration cards, or on the register itself. This problem – which appeared to be widespread – also served to fuel suspicions and allegations of selective disenfranchisement.

A number of us were handed copies of petitions addressed to Divisional Supervisory Commissions endorsed by chiefs or *chefs de quartier* who had undertaken registration drives in their areas, but who found that the voters' cards provided for distribution before polling day did not conform with the information that they had provided to the DOs. One chief was handed only 600 cards for a registered population of 1,200, and refused to take the responsibility for distributing any cards. In other cases, we witnessed voters' cards being held and distributed by chiefs and other unauthorised persons within or immediately adjacent to polling stations, although such practices are outside the electoral law.

In most locations women and the elderly who were in the queue were invited to move



Anxious times ... voters check for their names on an electoral register displayed outside a polling station on polling day

forward and vote ahead of men. However, one of our teams reported that in two remote enclaves they visited, the level of assistance required by women voters was such that it slowed the process down considerably. The Presiding Officers in each case therefore decided to allow men to vote first. We also received reports, though not many, of men being allowed to cast votes on behalf of their wives.

We noted with regret that no special provision was made within the law for assisted voting for blind or disabled persons and hope that the necessary framework will be provided at some time in the near future. In one isolated case a blind voter was turned away from a polling station. However, the general practice we observed was that disabled voters were indeed being assisted to exercise their franchise.

Several teams observed attempts at multiple voting or personation, and another team was given a detailed briefing on how multiple voting could be achieved.

From our observations, we concluded that many thousands of people were frustrated in their attempts to exercise their franchise and therefore may not have voted.

The Local Polling Commissions

We noted that by and large the Local Polling Commissions were properly constituted, with the inclusion of representatives of the political parties contesting the election.

In some polling stations Presiding Officers exercised their judgment and were prepared to substitute political party representatives for those originally assigned to their polling stations; in other instances, tension and confusion was caused by the reassignment of party agents either by their party or on the orders of the DO. There were instances where such agents were not permitted to take their place on the Polling Commission because of minor discrepancies in their personal details.

Regrettably, our teams also observed that contrary to the provisions of the electoral law attempts were made to bar the polling agents of certain political parties from entry to a number of polling stations, and in some cases these attempts succeeded; in two cases we know of,

polling agents were physically assaulted and ejected from the polling station, leaving no substitutes behind. Some of these incidents occurred at those stations sited in chiefs' residences where only the agents of the party the particular chief supported were allowed to enter. In all the instances we observed, these problems caused the heightening of tensions among those gathered at the polling stations and undermined confidence in the transparency of the process.

As noted above, there were variations in the degree to which members of the commissions were acquainted with the process and the procedures which had to be followed. On some points of the law, the interpretation of different Presiding Officers, and even between commission members, was inconsistent. For example, there was some variation as to practice on the issue of whether voters whose names were on the register but did not have a voter's card could vote if they produced their national identity cards.

The Close of Poll

Voting was officially scheduled to end at 6 p.m. The law allows that any persons in the queue at that time are entitled to cast their ballot before the ballot box is closed. Our teams observed that where the start of polling had been delayed, Presiding Officers exercised some discretion in allowing the polls to remain open slightly longer.

On the other hand, one Observer team found a polling station that had closed at 4 p.m., well ahead of the official time. The explanation given was that everyone on the list had voted. Another team was actually handed the result of the count at a polling station it visited shortly after 4 p.m. Here the reasons given for the early close of the station were poor lighting after 6 p.m. and the difficulty of negotiating the terrain to the divisional office in the dark. A particularly serious instance of early closing was observed at Balikumbat, in North-West Province, where one-third of the polling stations closed before the official time.

All our teams were present at stations to observe the close of the poll. We found that the procedures were unnecessarily complex and not uniformly followed, especially in the context of the many thousands of polling stations where lighting was a problem – some had not been



More cards ... on polling day some voters were still looking through piles of uncollected cards left outside polling stations for their voter registration card

provided with candles, lanterns/lamps or torches. Nevertheless, the procedures as laid down by the electoral law were generally adhered to by the polling officials and scrutineers present.

The Count

This section deals with the early stages of the counting and confirmation process. The last stage of the Count is the final declaration of results by the Supreme Court on the advice of the National Commission for the Final Counting of Votes. The question of delays in the proclamation of results is a matter of concern to us.

As has been set out in preceding chapters, it is clear that the legal and administrative framework for the actual counting of ballots at polling stations allowed for a high degree of transparency and public scrutiny. Indeed, the counts we observed were conducted in an open and highly professional manner. In spite of bad weather in some areas, and failing light, many voters attended polling station counts and attentively followed each step of the process.

One Observer team received a report of ballot boxes being removed from polling stations by the DO immediately at the close of poll and before the count had begun in spite of the protests from the mayor and political parties. The following day, further information was sought from the relevant SDO, and the team was informed that the DO had acted to forestall any disputes that might have arisen due to the poor lighting and the onset of rain.

Notwithstanding the Ministerial Order modifying the terms of the electoral law, and two public statements by the Vice-Prime Minister on the issue, it became apparent to the teams during the course of the day that many polling stations had not been provided with more than two copies of the Counting Report forms (*procès verbaux*). One Observer team reported that no forms at all were issued to the overwhelming majority of the polling stations it visited during polling. However, at other stations the Counting Reports were correctly completed and distributed to candidates' representatives on the Local Polling Commissions.

In many areas networks of party agents and local observers also began the collation of polling station results as soon as these were ready, and some of the Observer teams were given typed or verbal unofficial 'results', before they left their deployment areas the next day. One team observed a Divisional Supervisory Commission which had been called into session at mid-day on 18 May 1997 to await the arrival of results.

The process following the count at polling stations, however, became less transparent. It is of concern that the cast ballots were burned immediately after the completion of the count as were the discarded ballot papers. We were also concerned to find at a number of Divisional Offices visited by our teams later in the evening of 17 May a large number of unsecured ballot papers.

At the time of writing this Report, the procedures for the filing of challenges with the Supreme Court following the count and the collation of results by each respective Divisional Supervisory Commission were still under way.