

Conclusions and Recommendations

We accepted our mandate as an opportunity to contribute to the consolidation of democratic processes and institutions in Cameroon. In so doing, we were conscious of the background to the 1997 parliamentary elections, Cameroon's acceptance of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration and its consequent admission to the Commonwealth in 1995. We appreciated that the 1997 elections were only the second National Assembly elections since the introduction of multi-party politics in 1991, and followed a controversial process of constitutional review. We welcomed the fact that the Government of Cameroon had seen fit to invite the Commonwealth Secretary-General to constitute an Observer Group, and that opposition political parties had endorsed the invitation.

We were enthusiastically received by virtually all sections of the community and civil society during our stay in Cameroon. Government representatives and agencies with whom we interacted were co-operative and helpful, and we acknowledge the dedication of many such representatives throughout the country, often working under difficult circumstances. We were able to travel freely and widely during our stay; we thus believe that our observations represent an accurate sampling of events pertaining to the elections.

We are pleased to have observed a political campaign which was marked by freedom of association and expression. We received reports of incidents of harassment and intimidation, but these in our view were not of a systematic nature. The media operated in a generally free environment and reflected the full range of political views. Polling day itself was marked by a general air of calm and order.

We received representations that the time allowed for nominations did not give political parties enough time to organise the registration of their candidates. Moreover, the fact that the registration of candidates and of party agents was performed by government officials also opened the way to complaints by opposition parties of unfair treatment.

We welcome the growth of consensual political procedures prior to the elections. We found that the provisions of the 1996 Constitution and the electoral law laid the ground for an adequate electoral process. At the same time, we recognise that these elections took place in the context of Cameroon's ongoing transition from a one-party state during which the governing party was intimately identified with the state and its bureaucracy. Accordingly, it is our view that the administration of the election apparatus by a government department under the leadership of a Minister of Government undermined confidence in the process.

In this context, we also do not consider that the composition of the National Commission for the Final Counting of Votes, with its large number of government officials provided sufficient assurances of transparency. Further, we urge that the constitution of such an important body, as well as of all the various other commissions involved in the electoral process, should take place early in the electoral time-frame.

We consider it unfortunate that some of the processes and institutions envisaged by the Constitution which would have increased the consensual climate were either not enacted or not created. The most important of these is the Constitutional Council. As a consequence, the Constitutional Council's intended responsibilities were given to the Supreme Court, all of whose members are appointed by the Head of State.

Even before our deployment we had cause to be concerned about the state of the electoral register and our experience on election day bore out many of our misgivings. We recognise that many people may have decided for various reasons not to register and that others who were registered decided to abstain from voting. However, as our Report has amply shown, there were very many others who wished to register and were prevented from doing so. These people were therefore disenfranchised as a result of serious flaws in the registration process.

The failure to publish or otherwise make available the new register to citizens in advance of polling day did not allow for the usual process of voter scrutiny or for corrections to be made. And on election day itself, we met many potential voters with evidence of



Separate queues, equal votes ... women in Cameroon showed no less enthusiasm to exercise their franchise than their menfolk

registration who were unable to vote because their names were not on the register.

MINAT informed us that following the municipal elections in January 1996, the Ministry had decided that in order to improve the conduct of polling and to ensure that voters did not have to travel long distances to vote, the maximum number of voters per station should be reduced, leading to the establishment of some 3,000 new polling stations. Our observations on polling day confirmed that steps had been taken to locate polling stations within easy distance of communities: however, the problems encountered with the distribution of voters' cards (which indicated at which polling station a voter was registered), taken together with the late publication of the new list of polling stations, resulted in many voters being unable to locate their designated station. The extent of the consequent disfranchisement of voters is a serious concern to us.

We found a lack of uniform practice in regard to the use of voter registration cards. In many cases these cards could not be obtained by registered voters prior to the polls; and in many cases they were not available at polling stations on polling day, contrary to the assurances given by the authorities. At some polling stations, voters who were on the register were permitted to vote without voters' cards provided they could establish their identity through their national identity cards; at other stations, this was not permitted – though provided for by the electoral law.

There was also little regularity in the distribution of voters' cards. Often this was conducted by unauthorised persons. Such a process is open to serious abuse.

In a one-party state, there can be no clear distinction between the resources of the party and those of the state. During Cameroon's relatively brief period of transition to multi-party

democracy, this distinction is still far from clear, giving the ruling party a marked residual advantage. We hope that in the future this distinction will be unequivocally established in order to ensure a level playing field.

While we recognise the important role of traditional rulers and *chefs de quartier* in the social fibre of Cameroon, we consider the practice of locating polling stations in or adjacent to their private residences to be detrimental to the progress that has been made towards the establishment of a neutral and transparent electoral system. Now that Cameroon has opted for a multi-party democratic system, the question is whether chiefs should play a role in the electoral process. We believe that any participation by the chiefs should be clearly defined by law in order that the neutrality of the election machinery is not compromised.

We have already commended the dedication and commitment of the vast majority of polling officials we observed on polling day. We also note that while many polling commission officials and sub-divisional officers carried out their duties in compliance with the letter and the spirit of the law, we received complaints and witnessed practices which suggest that a minority of polling officials did not do so. We recommend that a more extensive training programme for polling officials should be undertaken before the next phase of the electoral process in Cameroon. We would also suggest that political party agents should be included in any such training programme. Clear and uniform instructions on the electoral process should be formulated and disseminated; these should also be made available to all political parties, candidates, the media and the general public.

During our deployment, we saw many 'loose' ballot papers. While there were no indications that any group was attempting to use these to manipulate the process, a far stricter security regime should be established to prevent the perception that it is possible to perpetuate a fraud in this manner.

The present system under which electoral returns are processed over an extended period of time before official results can be announced, is seen as further detracting from the transparency of the elections, and as detrimental to public confidence.

We were informed that in the run-up to the elections there had not been an extensive voter education programme, but in the majority of the areas where we observed the polling and the count we were impressed by the level of awareness and understanding of the voters. We believe, however, that a thoroughgoing voter education programme would improve the final registration figures. It would also in time ensure the eradication of those isolated instances we observed where voters, particularly women, were not conversant with the process.

We noted earlier the absence of any provisions in the law to enable assisted voting for the blind and disabled. We hope that the necessary framework will be provided at some time in the near future.

We feel it is unfortunate that a programme for the training of 2,000 domestic observers was cancelled by the Government. In our experience, confidence in the electoral process is encouraged by the presence of well-trained domestic observers who often play a useful role in further strengthening the democratic process. Those domestic observers accredited by MINAT whom we met were fully involved in the electoral process and carried out their work with dedication. We were sorry there were not many more of them.

We are of the firm view that to hold a viable poll in Cameroon the creation of an impartial and autonomous institution, such as an independent electoral commission, with the necessary legal and financial authority, is a given requirement. This is particularly important in the context of the need to enhance the credibility of the outcome of the poll by divorcing the administration and conduct of the elections from the structures and institutions of the executive arm of government and the ruling party. We hope that our recommendation in this respect will be viewed in the spirit in which it is made – as a constructive proposal by which the consensual basis of future elections in Cameroon could be strengthened.

We also noticed very wide discrepancies between the sizes of population represented by constituency seats. An independent electoral body might also therefore be charged with the task of demarcating constituency boundaries to give effect to the cardinal principle of equal representation by population while taking into account peculiar local circumstances.

It is not within the mandate of the Group to reach political judgments. We have confined

our remarks to the electoral processes and structures we have observed, and on this basis it is our belief that confidence in the conduct of the 1997 National Assembly elections has suffered from a flawed base. This can be rectified. We feel sure that the people of Cameroon are ready to welcome progress in this regard. We urge international organisations, including the Commonwealth, and bilateral donors to give consideration to providing the relevant expertise and technical assistance.

It is our broad conclusion that, building on the progress that has already been made, the electoral processes and structures in Cameroon can be modified and strengthened in order to further consolidate democracy and the democratic culture.