

CHAPTER 4



The Transition Process

The Report of the Observer Group to the July election made recommendations on five issues which have assumed particular importance for the opposition in the transition period:

- de-linking between SPPF and state be accelerated
- law enforcement and security agencies be reorganised
- the Voters' Registration List be reviewed
- a free and independent media be established
- funding of political parties be examined.

The Referendum was the second stage in the continuing process of returning Seychelles to multi-party democracy. The areas of concern which affected the first stage of the process, the July election, continued to have a direct bearing on the second stage. We therefore consider that in moving forward towards a democratic system, substantive progress needs to be made on those issues which had given the ruling party an unfair advantage over the opposition parties in July. This was especially so in the web of linkages developed over 15 years of one-party rule which have both fused and confused the party and the state. While the Group recognises that these links cannot be disentangled overnight, it is felt that greater attention by the Government to all of these issues of concern could have helped to instil more confidence in the transition process.

De-linking Between Party and State

The principal concern is about the existing District Council structure and powers which have remained unchanged. The chairpersons of District Councils are also members of the National Assembly for those Districts as well as chairpersons of the SPPF at the local level. In Seychelles, the District Councils are close to the people and are involved in the distribution of loans, grants, social security, housing, development projects and other socio-economic benefits and recreational facilities. The effect is that necessary governmental services are seen by the people as party services, if not party largesse.

This system of local government which was introduced in December 1991, just days before the announcement of a multi-party system, was provided for and would have been entrenched in the draft constitution. Thus, a major

concern was the continued concentration of power in the District Councils and the SPPF as the current ruling party, and ultimately, the President.

We raised these concerns with President René. He said signs of SPPF affiliation at the District Councils had been removed. The party flag no longer flies in front of the offices and party work is no longer done from there. The party is in the process of looking for new accommodation. All political parties now have the same access to the community centres as the SPPF.

The opposition, however, regarded these changes as merely cosmetic and demanded that more fundamental de-linking and reorganisation of the structures of party and state be made. Now that the Constitutional Commission is to meet again, there is a new opportunity for compromise to resolve this fundamental area of disagreement on the structure and function of local government.

Role of the Security Forces

It is generally acknowledged that the security forces have exercised discipline and restraint in the intervening period since the July election. But concern remains that the Militia, seen as the most partisan of all the security agencies, has not been disbanded nor has the structure of the security forces been reorganised to delink them from the party. The Minister of Finance, who is the Deputy Secretary-General of SPPF, remains the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces.

However, we noted signs of progress on the second day of polling, when the President's Office issued a press release, stating that the Militia will be restructured. Those permanently employed will be regrouped into a newly formed National Guard which will undertake static and escort duties. There will also be a part-time section manned by volunteers to help the police on patrol duties. The National Guard will have its own Commander who will answer directly to the Commissioner of Police. It will have police powers and be subjected to police rules and regulations. The Police Mobile Unit (PMU) which has been involved in static duty will be reorganised and retrained for its original duties of riot and crowd control.

We welcome these plans to restructure and see the continued need for the security forces to exercise discipline and show restraint. They fulfil an important role during the transition period and their proper conduct will go a long way to help engender confidence during these times of change. We take particular note of the peace and calm that prevailed on the day after the Referendum. There was no reported incident of disorder, violence, or intimidation as had occurred in July.

Voters' Registration List

The Director of Elections assured us that all possible steps had been taken to make the Voters' Registration List as accurate as possible for the Referendum. The list was opened again to allow those who had moved to have their names

transferred to their new district of residence, those who had turned 18 by 25 September 1992 to be registered and those ineligible to have their names removed. But the overseas voters on the list, numbering approximately 4,000, had not been removed as it was not known whether they were permanently or only temporarily overseas.

We are satisfied with the efforts made and the process undertaken by the Director of Elections and his staff to update the list and make it as accurate as possible.

Free and Independent Media

The July report had strongly urged that the Board of Directors of the Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), which is dominated by civil servants or people alleged to be SPPF sympathisers, should be reconstituted to reflect its independent status as required by law. In noting the vital role of the SBC in the transition process, and in the light of the complaints raised in the previous chapter, we once again draw the attention of the Government to this important matter.

Funding of Political Parties

The funding of political parties, which was a controversy in July, remains a contentious issue. While the Group in principle recognises the exigency of funding the parties during the transition period, we feel its details are a local political matter for the Government and the parties to resolve. Since the matter remains one of deep concern to the opposition, we would suggest that in the context of the de-linking process, there at least be clear separation of the funding arrangements for government function and for party activities.

One important recommendation of the July Group that has been adopted by all political parties was a Code of Conduct which would govern the parties during the Referendum and future elections. We are pleased to note that all eight parties, through the mediation of the Director of Elections, were able to reach consensus on the details of the Code which dealt with several specific issues that were a source of contention in the July election. As evidenced in our next chapter, this Code, officially implemented on 10 November, has done much to reduce tension and prevent abuse especially on polling day.