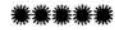


## CHAPTER 4



# The Campaign

The arrival of our Group in Seychelles within one week of the commencement of the four-day poll on 23 July, meant that an immediate objective of our wide-ranging consultations was to assess the campaign and its conduct. We approached this with a sense of urgency, not least because of a ban by the police on public meetings from 12 July. This early ban imposed without the knowledge and authority of the Director of Elections in contravention of the electoral law which had allowed for campaigning up to three days before the beginning of the poll, was unfortunate.

In our own case it deprived us of one of the ways to assess an important aspect of the campaign. However, in the limited time at our disposal, we were able to derive some sense of the anticipation about the return to multi-party democracy, and of the fears and uncertainties of the consequences of change – so graphically captured by a church leader in the phrase “it is like after a long drought and rain falls and everyone goes dancing in the rain”.

The dramatic move last December by President René to return to multi-party democracy had clearly caught not only his SPPF colleagues by surprise, but perhaps even more significantly his opponents. Nonetheless a new political landscape began to take immediate form with the re-emergence of the DP, the formation of new political parties, the return of exiles, and the gradual development of a climate more conducive to unfettered political activity.

The campaign had begun in earnest after the registration in April of all eight political parties. Unlike the ruling SPPF, the seven opposition parties faced a formidable task of establishing party machinery, identifying their bases of support and sources of funding. All parties faced the task of promoting a culture for multi-party democracy, including freedom of speech and assembly and respect for the rule of law.

All of the parties were faced with the urgent necessity of deciding on the issues to take to the electorate. Given that this was an election for a Constitutional Commission, the principal matter of substance to command attention was whether the country should have a presidential or parliamentary system of government. The apparent commitment of both the SPPF and the DP to a form of executive presidency tended to confuse the choice for those voters wanting to differentiate between the two major parties on matters of substance.

But it would appear that a great majority of voters saw the election in terms of a contest between two traditional political parties and the long established rivalry between their leaders. The campaign thus narrowed in effect to one between the two personalities involved, and President René in particular became the focus of much of the campaign’s rhetoric. Rumours abounded and

comments by government tended to be interpreted by the opposition in the worst possible light. Fears, real or imagined, were widely expressed about the present and future activities of the security forces, particularly the army, the militia and the PMU.

Concerns were also often expressed about the capacity of the SPPF Government and its organs to disperse or withhold favours, including jobs, housing and pensions. There was also residual controversy about the three-stage, six-month scenario for transition to multi-party democracy put in place by the Government although some opposition parties fully supported the calendar. All parties eventually confirmed to us their commitment to this process.

In any case it became clear that people were keen to vote and seemed willing to go along with the calendar which might explain why those political parties opposed to the process generally avoided taking positions which would derail it. Even the threatened boycott of the Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) over the appointment of a controversial Board did not materialise.

Notwithstanding the ban on public meetings from 12 July, we were able to attend privately arranged meetings, for which no permit was required. At one such meeting on a hillside under a large mango tree, two opposition leaders who had spent many years in exile were addressing a group of about 50 people on the new opportunities which the elections would bring. The attentive and good humoured crowd barely noticed the arrival of a police car and that one of the politicians had scampered down the hillside to reassure the police that it was a private meeting on private property.

The last fortnight prior to the poll was relatively peaceful although in the last few days incidents began to occur with increasing frequency. A small but vicious poster war broke out with groups of party activists and members of the militia and the PMU touring the city and countryside and tearing down posters of opposing parties. Events had begun to degenerate and the election itself came none too soon. We expressed our concern about the situation in correspondence with the Director of Elections and leaders of political parties, suggesting the adherence to a Code of Conduct. Copies of this correspondence and of our press release on the issue are at *Annex VI*.

Even so, on the eve of the main poll on Mahé a fracas erupted in Victoria when elements of the PMU fired tear gas at lunchtime crowds who had gathered to watch the parading of a cow to call attention to a alleged remark by President René likening Seychelles to a sickly cow which he had nurtured; he would share the milk but not the cow.

### **The Role of the Media**

President René's announcement of the return to multi-party democracy gave the green light for the inauguration of an independent media. Many may have thought that this could have been achieved overnight. But it was over-optimistic to expect that an independent media could emerge in Seychelles in the short period between December 1991 and July 1992. There are other reasons for this state of affairs which are peculiar to Seychelles.

Seychelles is a small and still relatively cohesive society. People tend to share news and information through 'Radio Bamboo', the local grapevine. This helps them to discern the truth behind the rumours and to distinguish smoke from fire.

Newspaper circulation is small. There is practically no advertising industry of any real size. The print media within the last two decades has been dominated by government and party-owned newspapers. There is also the difficulty of producing newspapers and radio and television broadcasts in three languages – Creole, which is the national language, English and French. The media is consequently under-developed.

### **The Print Media**

The only daily newspaper, *The Nation*, was established prior to independence by the Government, which still owns and controls it. It is produced by the Ministry of Information and has a circulation of about 4,000-5,000 and very little advertising. Its coverage of local and international events is thin. Nevertheless, it is not without influence, having been for a long time the only major source of news and information.

For some years, the only source of alternative news was a fortnightly magazine, *L'Echo Des Isles*, published by the Roman Catholic Church. Its philosophy has been that anything which affects the life of the people is proper material for a Church paper. It continues to be a vigorous publication.

The unfettering of the print media has led to the launching by some political parties of their own weekly or fortnightly publications to match the SPPF 's official organ, *The People*, and to balance the significant advantage the Government has had in Radio Television Seychelles (RTS) which later became the SBC and the only daily newspaper. By January, two such publications had come off the presses: *La Verité*, the voice of the MSD, edited by a member of its National Committee and *Regar*, tied to the Parti Seselwa by financial subsidy and editorial commitment. Two other journals impacted on the campaign – a newsletter produced by the DP and *Liberté*, published by the Seychelles Institute for Democracy. All were priced and their weekly circulations range from 2,000 to 4,000 each. In theory at least, they enabled all political groups to have access to a print media outlet.

### **Broadcast Media**

The sole broadcasting authority is the SBC. This is the successor to RTS, which was established by the Government as the radio arm of the Ministry of Information. Television was added in 1983.

Like its counterparts in the print media, the SBC appears to be inadequately funded and equipped. It is also desperately short of properly trained staff. It provides a limited service in Creole, English and French. Television is broadcast for five hours daily, on air just before 6 p.m. with the main TV evening news bulletin at 7 p.m. This is in Creole but there are some items in English and French. There

is a recess after the news from 7.30 to 8.30 p.m. and there is a measure of flexibility on weekends which sometimes provides additional broadcast time.

Radio also provides news bulletins in Creole, but has English and French versions as well. Its programming is more ambitious than television, but pressures on finance and staffing appear to contribute to an afternoon close-down on most week days. There are no current affairs programmes on radio, while TV subsumes this whole area of programming into its news broadcasts.

### Coverage of the Election

Despite these shortcomings, newspapers did provide a reasonable mix of news and views and the most intense political coverage within recent memory. They also printed news stories which would probably not have seen the light of day prior to December 1991. One such incident concerned allegations in the alternative media about a supposed arms shipment on a North Korean ship. It was instructive for us to note that there was no comment from any Government source. In normal circumstances, such a serious allegation would have provoked an immediate on-the-record official statement.

Additionally, during the fortnight before the elections when we were able to monitor the print media, it was clear to us that at least in the immediate pre-election period, there were no overt restrictions in place. In fact, *The Nation* accepted paid advertising inserts from at least two of the parties. It has to be noted that the alternative media matched *The Nation* in partisanship, with the latter carrying the Government's response to accusations made by opposition parties, and the former printing as much criticism of the Government as could be mustered. In any case *The Nation* provided extremely weak political coverage, avoiding all but the most obvious news events. This may be self-censorship given the new dispensation.

A major effort was made by the SBC to provide even-handed coverage of the campaign. It co-operated fully with the Director of Elections in arranging an agreed programme of radio and television broadcasts which enabled all political parties to have equal time to explain their policies. Planning began in mid-March with Mr Sauzier convening a meeting of all political parties and the SBC. What was on offer was a plan to allow each party equal time for party political broadcasts (PPBs) on radio and television. The meeting was attended by all political parties and later when one of the parties complained that it had not been consulted about the arrangements, the attendance record was able to show that the party concerned had indeed sent a representative to the meeting where agreement was reached.

At that time, the parties declined to take up the offer of PPBs because they felt that people would be bored by prolonged over-exposure and according to some, the offer was a trick by Government to cause them to lose public support. Nevertheless, the first round of PPBs began in May and lasted for eight weeks until the beginning of July.

The arrangements were quite complicated. Beginning 1 May each party was allowed 15 minutes on either radio or television every fortnight – 15 minutes

on radio one week and 15 minutes on television the following week. This lasted until 1 July, when for the remaining three weeks before the elections, the parties had 5 minutes per broadcast on either radio or television, to add up to 15 minutes every fortnight. For the final week of the campaign, Mr Sauzier drew lots for 5 minutes radio and television time. Some parties unfortunately received lots for both services on the same day and were forced to make exchanges with more fortunate parties. From Monday 13 July the SBC scheduled a series of 40-minute television and radio interviews with party leaders. These interviews were relaxed affairs, giving each party leader the opportunity to highlight chosen events of the whole campaign. From these interviews a programme was made and broadcast on 25 July – the day before the final election on Mahé.

In making these arrangements with the parties, the SBC completely surrendered editorial control over the content of the broadcasts. It insisted, however, on certain safeguards including the right to put out a disclaimer before and after every programme stating that the views expressed did not necessarily reflect the views of the SBC. Each party was required to provide an indemnity to cover any damages and costs which might be awarded against the SBC.

The SBC also reserved the right to censor and ‘bleep’ any statements which it considered immoral, indecent or defamatory. This was invoked on three occasions. Apart from the PPBs, the SBC continued, throughout the campaign, with its normal news coverage on both radio and television of official activities and political rallies which some of the parties construed as giving the ruling party undue advantage.

## Complaints

Surprisingly, we received no substantial complaints about the print media. This could be attributed to the fact that all the leading political parties had their own outlets and people accepted that *The Nation* and *The People* were indeed the voice of the party in office.

There was, however, one incident which has created the most sustained disagreement between the Government and the opposition parties. It occurred in April, over the composition of the Board of Directors of the newly established SBC.

The law establishing the SBC required the appointment of an independent Board of Directors. The President had appointed a Board and it was this which drew intense criticism. According to the opposition parties, there had been no proper consultation on the matter. But even more importantly, the Board as ultimately constituted, was staffed mostly with either civil servants or people alleged to be sympathisers of the SPPF. For all these reasons, the opposition parties demanded a reconstituted Board which would be the result of joint consultation.

The President stood by his decision and a row broke out, with the opposition parties threatening to boycott both the elections and the SBC’s schedule of

PPBs. The eventual boycott of the PPBs was shortlived. Even so, there were strong reverberations of this disagreement when we arrived in the country some months later.

In addition to the complaints about the composition of the Board, there was another complaint to the effect that the SBC's coverage of political rallies often included on-screen pictures of the faces of people who were present. We were told that an admittedly small number of people had been identified and had been dismissed from Government jobs. This was a complaint which we found impossible to verify, but we have to record that it was widely believed and might have accounted for the reluctance of ordinary people to speak to us when the SBC's cameras were in attendance. It was clear that there was a fear of being identified on TV as a supporter of an opposition party.

Two party leaders also complained that power cuts had affected a significant section of Mahé during their broadcasts. The Group was not able to ascertain the reasons for this; but the fact that it had occurred was in itself unfortunate since it deprived a significant number of voters of seeing the main TV broadcast of the alternative views of at least two leaders. This was however somewhat minimised by the fact that the normal practice was to broadcast the sound tape of TV interviews on radio.

We believe that complaints against the Board and the manner in which it had been appointed were legitimate. Even taking into account the fact that Seychelles is a small island country with a limited pool of qualified people who could be called upon to serve in an independent capacity and that 15 years of one-party rule would probably have reduced these numbers still further, we consider that renewed efforts must now be made to appoint people with the requisite knowledge and experience. For if the Board is to be effective, it must not only be independent; it must also be seen to be independent. In this context, the opposition parties must also be seen to be using the opportunity to participate in the appointment procedures.

We feel that this is a matter which requires immediate attention, and we urge that every effort should be made to reach an all-party agreement on it.

We also have to record an incident which affected us. After witnessing the aforementioned incident involving the cow, our Chairman wrote to the Director of Elections and issued a statement on Saturday, 25 July (*Annex VII*) describing the incident as ugly and as one which could have developed into a major fracas. While exhorting party leaders to adhere to a Code of Conduct, he particularly singled out the security forces, advising them to show wisdom, discipline and restraint in the exercise of their powers. Later that evening when the statement was reported on the SBC, there was no mention of the security forces. We received many telephone calls from listeners protesting at what appeared to be a one-sided view of the incident. When we checked on this, we discovered that due to time constraints, the SBC was unable to use the full statement, and unfortunately used the excerpt in such a way as to give the impression that all political leaders bore primary responsibility for the events which had occurred.

While we are fully aware of the difficult conditions under which the media has

had to operate, we believe that it is now imperative to understand that multi-party democracy requires a free and independent media and that the transition to it will bring its own special challenges. It will mean converting from a government-owned and dominated sector into a broad-based and independent body. It will entail the shedding of long ingrained habits of work formed over the years. It will not be easy.

### **Voter Education Programme**

The media fully supported the voter education programme initiated by the Director of Elections which was designed to familiarise people with the complexities of voting in an election with eight candidates. Radio, television and the print media were involved. The large ballot paper, with photographs of the party leaders in colour, was displayed in advertisements in newspapers and on television and there were explanatory notes in the print media and voiced instructions on how to vote on radio and television.

We also observed the production of a video detailing what a voter should do on polling day. There was a mock-up of a polling station, complete with election official, ballot box and polling booth. A voter was shown entering the station, having the name checked, being handed the ballot paper, entering the booth and then putting the ballot paper first into the envelope and then into the ballot box.

Another programme instructed the voter on the actual voting procedure, with close-ups of the ballot paper and instructions on how to put the 'X'-mark against the chosen candidate. The advice was presented slowly and carefully, and any voter who had seen it would have had no difficulty in handling the situation with aplomb on polling day. This was borne out by our observations of events on polling day. There were posters of the ballot paper in the booths which also helped to familiarise voters with what to expect.

It was a well-run programme and we commend the Director of Elections and his staff for this effort.