

CHAPTER 5



The Conduct of the Poll

Polling began on 23 July and was spread over four days. The first three days covered the Inner and Outer Islands and the last day, 26 July, covered the main islands of Mahé, Praslin and La Digue. A copy of a statement issued by our Chairman on the eve of the poll is at *Annex VIII*. In considering whether the poll was properly conducted we focused on the following issues:

- (a) Voting Procedures in the Inner and Outer Islands
- (b) Events on Main Polling Day
- (c) Performance of Electoral Officials
- (d) Adequacy of the Registration List
- (e) Conduct of the Count

Voting Procedures in the Inner and Outer Islands

From 23 to 25 July, we accompanied electoral officials by aircraft and by boat to witness the people of the scattered Inner and Outer Islands cast their vote for the 23rd electoral area. We were impressed by the efficient and comprehensive arrangements made by the Office of the Director of Elections to enable the comparatively small number of voters from 17 inhabited islands to exercise this right. For these isolated islanders, it was a special occasion as this was the first time that they had been given the opportunity to do so. In the past their representative to the People's Assembly was appointed by the President. Enfranchising them was an expensive operation and took up the bulk of the election budget. But this was the price of democracy.

The polling booth, boxes, papers, envelopes and other voting material were flown from island to island. By the time the aircraft landed on each island, most of the voters were already waiting in line. The polling booth was put up quickly and the procedure for opening the poll was followed. Two polling agents representing all eight parties were supposed to witness the process on each island station. But on a few islands, only one turned up and on the Inner Island of Silhouette, neither polling agent arrived for duty. We were thus especially vigilant in ensuring that the process was beyond reproach.

The voters were processed quickly and efficiently. However, voters from four islands – Providence, Desroches, Aldabra and North – were unable to cast their votes because stormy seas prevented them from taking a boat to the bigger islands where the polling station had been set up.

We received no complaints from agents or voters about the proceedings of the day. As we moved from island to island and broke for lunch, the Electoral

Officers took special care to keep the ballot boxes and papers within close sight at all times. At the end of the day, the boxes were taken to National House in Victoria where they were once again sealed and stored in a strong-room under 24-hour guard.

Events on Main Polling Day

By 5 a.m. on the main polling day of 26 July, all Electoral Officers were at the office of the Director of Elections to collect ballot boxes, ballot papers and envelopes, perforating stamps, indelible ink and other material for the day. A charter aircraft transferred electoral staff for the three polling stations in the islands of Praslin and La Digue. By 6 a.m. we had begun to make our rounds of the 22 polling stations. Each station was headed by an Electoral Officer and a staff of at least eight assistants. We found the Electoral Officers competent and efficient in following the procedures laid down to open the poll. Party polling agents verified that the ballot boxes were empty and witnessed them being sealed and padlocked. While most polling stations opened on time at 7 a.m., a few were delayed because of transport problems.

By 6.30 a.m., long lines had already formed outside polling stations. At the bigger stations, voters waited for over two hours to vote. But they stood in line patiently, quietly and did not complain about the long wait. Many of them stayed behind in the vicinity of the polling stations just to observe the historic event. Those we spoke to told us they were happy with the process and were confident that their vote would remain secret. Following our intervention with the President and the Director of Elections, we noticed no army personnel being transported in military vehicles or voting in uniform except in one case when the soldier on duty at State House was seen casting his vote near closing time. His presence was not seen as intimidating to the few voters still waiting in line. Copies of correspondence and our press release on this matter are at *Annex IX*.

The procedure required the voter to produce an Identity Card and this was checked against name and National Identity Number in the Registration List. Once the voter had been correctly identified, a ballot paper and envelope, both perforated with the station's special marking, were issued and purple indelible ink was dabbed on the cuticle and nail of the left thumb. The voter then entered a booth, marked the ballot paper, folded it into four and placed it in the envelope, and then deposited the envelope into the ballot box in full view of electoral officials and party polling agents. A few party agents complained that because the polling booth was not curtained off, it was possible to tell how a voter had marked the ballot. But this was proven rather far-fetched. At some polling stations, a few enthusiastic party supporters had marked an 'X' against their party name on the sample ballot paper with instructions on how to vote which was pinned up in each polling booth. Electoral assistants who were ushering voters into the booths quickly noticed and replaced the display.

Electoral Officers were kept busy throughout the day. The telephone and fax machines installed in each station were put to constant use to check with headquarters on problems with voters' registration. While there were isolated

problems of voters with the same name and Identity Card number, most of the cases needing clarification were those of voters registered in one electoral area and seeking to vote at a different one.

Electoral Officers were also particularly busy with the many elderly and infirm who turned up to vote. Earlier in the day this slowed down the lines considerably as it took time to get them identified and help them cast their votes. In accordance with procedure, the Electoral Officer assisted, witnessed by the accompanying relative or friend. Several opposition polling agents complained that many such people were there not out of choice, but had been brought in by the SPPF and pressured to vote for the party.

The great majority of voters, however, were able to mark the ballot papers without difficulty. The voter education campaign run by the Director of Elections on television and radio, and in the print media, would have helped considerably. The ballot paper was printed in colour with the pictures of the eight party leaders, their logos and party name. A sample is at *Annex X*. A thick felt pen was provided in the ballot booth for the voter to mark a cross in the box against the party of his choice. Many voters had problems folding the thick ballot paper into four and fitting it into the envelope. As a result, the envelopes were bulky and the ballot boxes, which were supposed to take 1,000 envelopes, quickly filled up. Extra wooden ballot boxes used in past elections had to be delivered to some stations.

Our access to all polling stations was unhindered. We received the full cooperation of Electoral Officers and were impressed by their overall efficiency in running their stations and dealing with all the problems that cropped up. Electoral Officers managed their stations differently. At some, the voters' list was divided into alphabetical groups, each under the supervision of one assistant. This system, however, did not work consistently. At some stations the long lines of voters moved smoothly and swiftly. At others where the system held up the lines, officials effected quick adjustments and voters were channelled to the checking desk with the shortest line. The lack of adequate space and the high turnout of the elderly who needed much more time to be processed, all contributed to the delay. At some stations, voting had to be extended up to two hours beyond the official closing time of 5 p.m. to enable everyone to vote. For the future, some improvement could be made to the organisation of polling stations so that voters could be processed quickly.

Wherever we went, our presence was appreciated. Party polling agents and supporters found our presence particularly reassuring and readily consulted on any problems they had. While all parties were entitled to a polling agent at each station, not all exercised this right. Most of the agents were well-briefed and kept a watchful eye on proceedings. They had their own Registration Lists and carefully ruled out the names of those who had voted. They sat in full view of the ballot box and polling booths. Electoral Officers were scrupulous in informing the agents of the steps they had taken to deal with each problem on the Registration List.

We received complaints in the course of the day that the indelible ink used could be removed immediately by soap and water, particularly if it was dabbed only on the nail. We brought this matter to the attention of the Office

of the Director of Elections. At a polling station in Praslin, a man who had voted earlier had washed off the ink and attempted to vote again, this time using his brother's identity card. The policeman on duty recognised him and chased him away.

The police force was represented at all polling stations and were helpful, but unobtrusive. They facilitated the flow of voters through the stations and were a reassuring presence. We were generally impressed with the manner and confidence in which they exercised their authority and their apparent rapport with the public. Personnel from the PMU were seen at a few polling stations, some standing inside and some outside. At one station where the PMU presence seemed obtrusive, this was brought to the attention of the Electoral Officer and the PMU man left the premises.

The apparent canvassing of voters outside polling stations caused some agitation. The ruling party and at some stations, the DP too, had opened up check-point tables where their supporters could first check their names on the Registration List. Each accused the other of canvassing voters too close to the polling stations. At some stations, SPPF supporters were accused of handing voting cards to all voters just as they entered the compound of the polling station. Where the SPPF was the only party canvassing, agents of the DP and Parti Seselwa were particularly upset as they felt strongly that this last minute canvassing gave the SPPF an unfair advantage. They also suggested that this constituted a form of intimidation particularly when Cabinet Ministers were involved. We were not aware of instances of such activity inside the 50-metre zone prescribed under the legislation. At one station, the Electoral Officer had to intervene on behalf of agitated party agents to ask noisy SPPF supporters to stop canvassing. It appeared that police officers in charge were wary of taking any action.

While in some Commonwealth countries such canvassing is disallowed, in others such party check-point tables and last minute cajoling of voters just outside the precincts of polling stations are very much a part of electioneering. There is need to clarify this matter for future elections so that it will not be a source of aggravation.

Another area that needs more consideration is the special provision made to allow voters to vote at stations other than their place of registration. This last-minute relaxation of procedures was appreciated but at the same time was a time-consuming and cumbersome process for Electoral Officers. Telephones and telefaxes installed at each polling station enabled the Electoral Officer to certify with the Election Office in Victoria that such voters had not voted at their original polling station. Their names on that list had to be cancelled and the authority to vote at the new station faxed back. This took much time and delayed the voting process. In one case, a man who had voted at one station tried to vote at another, claiming that his original station was too far away. When his name was faxed to that station to be cancelled, it was discovered that he had already voted. He was reported to the police and arrested.

Given the context of this election and the geographical features of Seychelles, this special effort to enable as many Seychellois as possible to vote was commendable. But the system, which proved cumbersome and is fraught with

the possibility of misuse, needs to be reviewed, perhaps with access limited to cases of real necessity and not merely of convenience.

Performance of Electoral Officials

We were most impressed by the competence of the electoral officials. They went out of their way to alleviate suspicions by keeping polling agents informed of actions they had taken to deal with particular problems.

The old and infirm and others who did not understand the procedures were patiently assisted. The procedures were explained to them fully, openly and impartially. To maintain the flow, electoral assistants were on hand to usher the voters into empty polling booths, direct them to the ballot box and out of the station.

The agents we talked to all expressed satisfaction with the procedures followed and the system set in place for each polling station.

Adequacy of the Registration List

Given the background of complaints from some party leaders about the Registration List, the adequacy of the list on polling day was a welcome outcome. We did not meet a single party agent at the 22 polling stations who expressed unhappiness with the list. The high turnout, which at some stations went beyond 90 per cent, suggested that people who had registered were able to vote. By the end of the day 42,025 had voted, an impressive turnout of 84 per cent.

There were however isolated cases of voters with the same name and Identity Card number appearing at the same station. The second voter was not allowed to vote until the confusion was cleared up at the Electoral Office. At most stations the numbers of those who could not vote because they were not on the register were insignificant. At one station, a foreigner who was registered to vote was recognised by party agents as a Mauritian. She admitted to the Electoral Officer that while she was married to a Seychellois, she had not adopted Seychelles citizenship. She agreed to refrain from insisting on voting.

Conduct of the Count

Counting was conducted at the polling stations soon after the close of the poll. At some stations where voting time had to be extended beyond 5 p.m. to cope with the high turnout, the counting was much delayed. At other stations, the counting was very slow with the last not finishing until the early hours of the following day. But this provided us with ample opportunity to observe the count in most of the polling stations.

The counting of ballots from the Inner and Outer Islands was conducted on 26 July at National House in Victoria, the headquarters of the Office of the Director of Elections. The boxes had been stored in a strong-room there until then.

The correct procedures were carried out at all counting stations and we received no complaints about this phase of the process. The procedure required that at the close of poll, the ballot box in use was sealed and the Electoral Officer and his staff, witnessed by party agents, should begin the process of reconciling the number of people who voted with the number of ballots issued. Once this was settled to the satisfaction of all, the day staff were dismissed, and a new team took over the count. At some stations though, a shortage of staff meant that the electoral assistants had to do the counting in the evening.

The ballot boxes had been kept in view with seals in place. They were taken to the counting table, the seals broken and the ballots poured out with all present scrutinising the process keenly. The envelopes were counted and again the total compared with the number of ballots issued. The ballots were then counted and a final reckoning of the ballot papers and the votes for each of the parties totalled. Once the total number for all candidates, excluding those rejected, agreed with the number expected, the Electoral Officer declared the result. This was faxed to the Chief Electoral Officer at National House where the total number of votes each party received from the 23 electoral areas were to be tabulated.

The final results were announced live on television and radio by the Director of Elections at 2.30 a.m. The SPPF had received 58.4 per cent (24,538) of the vote; DP 33.7 per cent (14,150); Parti Seselwa 4.4 per cent (1,829); NAP 1.6 per cent (672); MSD 0.8 per cent (322); SNM 0.6 per cent (259); SLP 0.5 per cent (201); and SCD 0.1 per cent (54) making a total of 42,025.

The successful conclusion of the first stage in the transition to multi-party democracy in Seychelles is an achievement of which Seychellois should be proud. We observed all relevant aspects of the arrangements for and the conduct of the election in accordance with the laws of Seychelles. We were satisfied that events on the four days of polling were free from significant defects which could in any way mar the credibility of the outcome. The people were able to exercise their right to vote freely and in secrecy. We were impressed not only with the peace and orderliness of polling day, but with the quiet dignity and patience of the great majority of the people of Seychelles. That the poll had been free and fair is a verdict that we and other international observer groups had no difficulty in reaching.

A copy of our final press release, issued on the eve of departure from Seychelles, is at *Annex XI*.