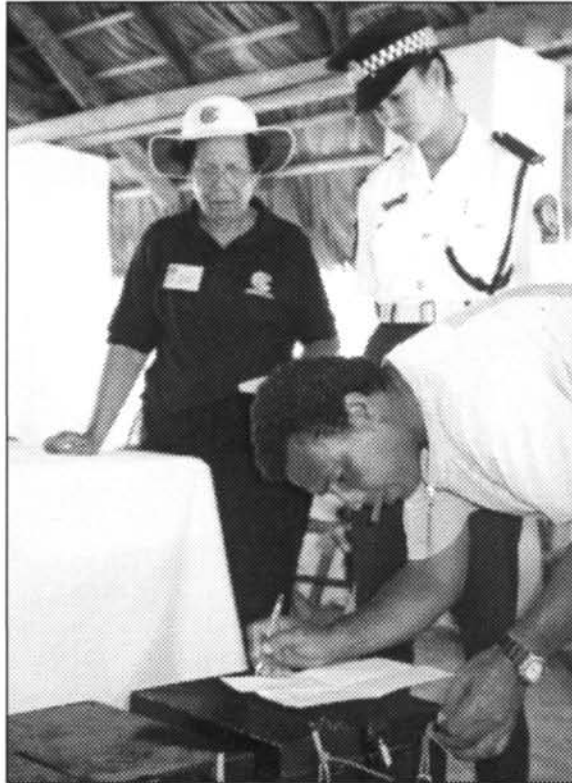


# Introduction

The historic decision to constitute a Joint Observer Group from the Commonwealth and La Francophonie to observe the 1998 Presidential and National Assembly elections in Seychelles followed invitations from the Government of Seychelles to Chief Emeka Anyaoku, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, and Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary-General of La Francophonie, to send observers to the elections. Following consultation between the two Secretaries-General, a decision was taken to send a joint Assessment Mission from both organisations to visit Seychelles from 1 to 5 February 1998. The mission comprised two staff members from the Commonwealth Secretariat, a representative of La Francophonie and an official from l'Agence de la Francophonie. They met with the Electoral Commissioner and his staff, representatives of all the political parties and groups with an interest in the elections. All supported the proposal that a Joint Observer Group from the Commonwealth and La Francophonie observe the Presidential and National Assembly elections.



*Observer Elaine Raftopoulos watches preparations for polling at Fregate*

## The Observer Group and its Terms of Reference

This was the first example of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie observing elections jointly in a country which is a member of both organisations. Heads of Government of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie regard the observation of elections in member countries as a means of strengthening democratic processes and institutions. In this context, it was considered that a joint initiative would assist the consolidation of multi-party democracy in Seychelles, while also strengthening Commonwealth/La Francophonie co-operation. Both organisations had separately observed the country's transitional elections in July 1993.

Our Group consisted of a Chairperson plus eight observers, supported by seven members of staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat and l'Agence de la Francophonie, as listed in *Annex I*. Our Group was led by Sir John Compton, former Prime Minister of St Lucia. Before leaving for Seychelles, each of us was informed of the Terms of Reference of the Group. They were as follows:

The Group is established by the Secretaries-General of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie, following requests by the Government of Seychelles to the two organisations and supported by the political parties. It is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the elections in accordance with the laws of Seychelles. It is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and to determine in its own judgment whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the result of the elections reflects the wishes of the people.



*A voter casting her ballot at Silhouette*

The Group is to act impartially and independently. It has no executive role; its function is not to supervise but to observe the process as a whole and to form a judgment accordingly. It would also be free to propose to the authorities concerned such action on institutional, procedural and other matters as would assist the holding of the elections.

The Group is to submit its report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, and the Secretary-General of La Francophonie. It will be forwarded to the Government of Seychelles, to the leadership of the political parties taking part in the elections and thereafter to all member governments of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie.

A press release announcing our mission was issued in London on 10 March 1998. (See *Annex II*.)

### **Method of Work**

Most of the members of our Group assembled in London for briefing by the Commonwealth Secretary-General on 11 March 1998. We left later that evening for Seychelles, and arrived in Mahé on 12 March 1998. We were joined there by the other members of our Group. On 13 March we issued an Arrival Statement in English and French at a press conference (see *Annex III*) and began a series of briefings, beginning with a meeting with the Electoral Commissioner, Mr Gerard Ah-Shung, and members of his staff. Meetings were conducted in English and French, reflecting the working languages of both organisations as well as two of the three languages spoken in Seychelles.

Our meetings and consultations with representatives of the political parties contesting the elections, non-governmental organisations including the Chairman of the Liaison Unit of Non-

Governmental Organisations of Seychelles (LUNGOS), civil society, the Churches, the Commission for Women, the media and others, continued until the morning of 19 March 1998. We also met with some representatives of the diplomatic community from Commonwealth and La Francophonie countries located in Mahé. A schedule of our engagements is at *Annex IV*.

Our consultations were not restricted to formal meetings at our headquarters in Mahé. In the period leading up to the elections, members of our Group paid several visits to the temporary Election Headquarters at the Seychelles National Library to seek clarification of issues that had been raised by political parties and others, as well as to view the storage of election material and to gain an appreciation of the proposed set-up for the three polling days. We visited party headquarters and, in our designated electoral districts, met with District Administrators, Electoral Officers, party agents, the police and members of the public. We were able to observe the final rally of each of the three political parties and to witness door-to-door campaigns by candidates from each of the political parties.

The 115 islands which comprise the Republic of Seychelles are spread out in the western part of the Indian Ocean in an Exclusive Economic Zone of more than 1.3 million sq km. For this reason, the elections were held over three days from 20 to 22 March. Polling on the smaller Outer and Inner Islands took place on 20 and 21 March. We were permitted to travel with electoral officials, accompanied by balloting material, to observe every voting station on the Inner and remote Outer Islands. We travelled by boat or by plane to Farquhar, Assumption, Alphonse, Marie Louise, D'Arros, Remire, Silhouette, Desroches, Coetivy, Bird, Denis, Platte and Fregate. Some of those visits involved three hours of travel each way.

Polling on the two largest islands, Mahé and Praslin, as well as on La Digue, took place on 22 March 1998. We divided into six two-person teams and one team of three, led by our Chairperson, in order to observe polling in the districts to which we had been assigned. In almost every case our teams were composed of representatives of both the Commonwealth and La Francophonie. On Thursday 19 March two of us were deployed to Praslin to be in place for observation of the elections on Praslin and La Digue on 22 March. The rest of us observed polling at the 22 polling stations on Mahé as well as at the polling station which had been established at the Election Headquarters for voters from the Inner Islands who were stationed on Mahé. The Chairperson announced the deployment of Observers on 18 March (see News Release of 19 March at *Annex V*). A copy of our Deployment Schedule is at *Annex VI*.

In the days before polling on the main islands, we visited polling stations to check on preparations for the poll. On 22 March 1998, polling stations were scheduled to open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., except at the Election Headquarters where the polls closed at 12 noon. We arrived at polling stations early in order to observe the procedures for the opening of poll. We spent the rest of the day visiting all polling stations, where we talked to electoral officials, party agents and members of the public. We returned to polling stations which we had identified during the course of the day to observe the close of poll and the count. We were guided in our work by Observation Notes and on polling day used Check Lists. These are reproduced at *Annex VII*. During the day, and after the counting of votes had ended, some of us visited the Election Headquarters to witness returns from Electoral Officers by fax, the entering of results into a computer database and the announcement of the results. Some of our Group were present at the Seychelles National Library to observe the announcement of the results by the Electoral Commissioner and the press conference by President Albert René and leaders of the opposition which followed.

At 9.15 p.m. our Chairperson issued an Interim Statement (see *Annex VIII*). This was in order to register publicly and transparently the views of the Observer Group after the polls had closed but before the outcome of the elections was announced.

Late that evening, the two members of our Group who had been deployed to Praslin and La Digue returned to our headquarters and on 23 March we began an extensive debriefing in preparation for the writing of our Report.

We were honoured to have been invited to State House for the Swearing-in Ceremony of the President and Vice-President on 23 March 1998.