

## Chapter 3

# The Campaign and the Media



*In the days before the elections, hundreds of people queued for hours to receive emergency funding and other social welfare payments. Some of the longest queues were outside Ocean Gate House in Victoria. Observers received complaints that the payments were a means of influencing people's vote*

### The Campaign

Campaigning for the 1998 Presidential and National Assembly elections began on 27 February and continued until 18 March. There was then a two-day 'cooling off' period, as required under Clause 50(1) of the Elections Act 1995. At the start of the campaign, representatives of the three parties met with the Electoral Commissioner and agreed with him a Code of Conduct (see *Annex XI*) within which they, their members and supporters would operate.

The first requirement of the Code was that existing election laws and regulations would be followed and that parties would not, by word or action, create tension and disrupt the atmosphere of the elections. The Code also said there would be equal opportunity for publicity, warned against the use of government or Defence Force vehicles for party purposes, and forbade the parties from establishing election camps, check-points (which had been complained of as points for intimidation in the 1993 elections) or handing out refreshments on election day. It reminded parties that attempts to influence voting through money or allurements were election offences. It specified that only certain billboards could carry party notices and posters. Because permission had to be sought from the police for the use of loudhailers, the parties agreed not to use them in the campaign.

The result was that on the surface at least, it appeared to us that much of the campaign period was curiously devoid of the openly festive air in the streets that has characterised campaigns in other countries, save for the broadcast media's high-profile party political broadcasts (PPBs) and party



*During the campaign, party billboards and banners were everywhere. This huge billboard of President René was erected outside SPPF headquarters*

announcements. It was not uncommon for the posters of all three parties to be clustered on a group of billboards at a roundabout or street corner, but in the days before the polling, we noticed a proliferation of cloth banners, with colour being central to the parties' identities – red for the SPPF, blue for the DP and green for the United Opposition. A huge billboard of President René, erected outside the Victoria bus terminal, was the subject of a complaint to the Electoral Commissioner, on the basis that it was within 200 metres of a polling station. It was taken down after the Electoral Commissioner wrote to the SPPF.

We attended the last public rallies and meetings of the three parties at Praslin on 15 March and on Mahé on 15 and 16 March, called at the various party headquarters to view their preparations for the polls, and accompanied some candidates as they campaigned from door to door. In the hours before a rally began, supporters streamed out of villages and suburbs dressed in party colours and symbols on headbands, T-shirts and leggings. SPPF supporters had, in addition, party torches, umbrellas, coffee mugs and cassettes of music. The rallies themselves were colourful, with balloons and streamers and popular music or musicians whipping up enthusiasm

before the main speakers came on. The parties also gave us various samples of party election materials, including posters and flyers.

The pointed but apparent good-natured political banter at rallies belied wrangling that had begun on nomination day when all the parties traded accusations over whether the names of the 50 people who support a candidate's nomination should be made known (see Chapter 2).

The Electoral Commissioner told us that he had received complaints that government vehicles were being used for campaigning and had been given an assurance that a government circular would be issued forbidding this. He similarly dealt with a complaint that in at least one district (Glacis), identity cards were being collected from elderly people, and he intervened to put a halt to this as it could be construed as a form of coercion.

We learned that there was no limit in law to either a party's or an individual candidate's campaign expenditure, but that Clause 94 of the Elections Act 1995 stipulated that within 60 days after the results of the elections were declared, a candidate, party or party agent had to submit to the Electoral Commissioner a statement of funds received and expenses incurred. This statement did not have to disclose the identity of the source of the funds or to whom payments had been made.

### **Distribution of Emergency Funds and Social Security Payments**

We received numerous reports that large numbers of people were forming around social security payout points in Victoria and mobile units in some districts and that through accelerated decision-making by the Means Testing Board on emergency funding, money was being given out to people just before the elections as a possible way of influencing their vote. We saw for ourselves long queues outside the Ocean Gate House payout point of the Ministry of Finance.

We were told, however, that such queues were not unusual for statutory benefits payouts. We were shown lists of people against whom payment was ordered and learned from the Means Testing Board that requests for emergency funding were properly channelled, and recommendations made, through

the District Administrators. This process could take two weeks, but authorisation could also be made within a few hours. Some people in the queue told us that they had been waiting for hours “for money” and that it was the first time they were able to obtain such payments; but others refused to talk to us.

We contacted the Electoral Commissioner to obtain clarification on this matter, and learned that complaints had also been lodged by opposition parties. The Electoral Commissioner wrote to the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs on 17 March requesting advice on the payments and asking that a press statement be issued on the matter. The Principal Secretary replied the next day, explaining that emergency payments were made to individuals and families in distress and explaining the process. She also said: “One-off payments are made throughout the year. It is evident that periodically, some members of the public turn up to ‘try their luck’.” She added that the Ministry did not consider it necessary to issue a press statement on the matter (see *Annex XII* for both letters).

Complaints about the payments continued and when our Chairperson made his Interim Statement at the close of polls on the evening of 22 March, he “noted, with concern, the method of payment of large amounts of social security benefits immediately before the elections, and consider(ed) this is a measure easily subject to misinterpretation” (see *Annex VIII*). Hours later, after being declared winner, President René said that it was unfortunate that the timing of the payments could have given rise to suspicion and said that the Government would look into the system of payments.

The Group also received complaints relating to the distribution of funds, gifts and favours, unattributed to government finances, by all three parties. These ranged from the alleged free distribution of alcohol to direct financial inducements to voters. It was not possible for our Observers to verify these reports with first-hand evidence.

### **Intimidation**

Our Group received some reports of verbal intimidation and allegations of implied threats of loss of government benefits, such as subsidised housing, should people fail to vote for government candidates. We were also told that people were afraid they would lose their licences to operate businesses should it become known that they voted for one of the opposition parties. Many people complained in this context of the pervasive influence of the government-operated Seychelles Marketing Board, the body responsible for the issue of business licences.

The campaign, however, remained free from violence until the eve of polls when, apparently, National Guard personnel fired shots which wounded the wife of a DP candidate and some other people. We investigated this incident immediately upon learning of it and were convinced by the evidence that a shooting had taken place, though details of the circumstances varied. As it constituted an unfortunate occurrence which could have raised tensions, we sought further details through the Office of the Electoral Commissioner. However, no explanation was provided and accordingly our Chairperson also referred to the incident in his Interim Statement. The President subsequently expressed his regret and said the matter would be investigated.

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

As in many small island states, information travels quickest by word of mouth. We were repeatedly told that anything that happened on one end of Mahé was known at the other end within hours. To the extent that this was true, we felt that it acted as some sort of check on the government-dominated official media – for what was not officially reported was nevertheless most often known.

The different viewpoints reflected by the official media, and the smaller newspapers and newsletters with party allegiances, however, ensured that members of the public could, if they wished, have access to information on all party policies and on most issues if they wished. Nevertheless, the official media being the most pervasive, was clearly also the most influential and indeed was used to convey the Electoral Commissioner’s voter education programmes (see Chapter 2).



*On Silhouette, the lone independent candidate's poster (left) was put up on the side of a building*

### ***The Broadcast Media***

The Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) dominates broadcasting with its single television channel and two radio stations. It evolved from being an arm of the Ministry of Information into a corporation that is funded through the National Assembly. We were told that some 90 per cent of the approximate 14,000 households in Seychelles owned television sets, that almost all had radio sets, and that both mediums broadcast extensively in Creole, French and English. For many in the smaller Inner and Outer Islands, radio was the only means by which they were able to keep in touch with public affairs.

The importance of television and radio is underlined by Article 168 of the Constitution which proclaims that state-owned broadcasting media receiving state funding should be 'so constituted and managed that they may operate independently of the State and of the political or other influence of other bodies, persons or political parties.' The Article goes on to say that such broadcasting media should 'afford opportunities and facilities for the presentation of divergent views.'

The SBC has taken up this challenge. As part of its remit, in the past five years it had undertaken to extensively broadcast on television and radio the National Assembly sessions, the annual State of the Nation address by the President and the Leader of the Opposition's reply, and the annual national budget presentation and the full budget debate.

When election campaigning began officially at the end of February 1998, SBC programming concerning party broadcasts and campaigning immediately came under provisions in the Elections Act 1995, as amended in 1996, which guaranteed all parties and candidates the right to have their views broadcast. It also required the Electoral Commissioner, in consultation with the SBC, to allocate free and equal broadcast time to parties and candidates. The enshrining of these rights in law and the drawing of the impartial Electoral Commissioner into the broadcast process was a significant development since the 1993 elections.

The result was, in our opinion, a just and equitable airing of political views during the campaign period and we did not receive a single complaint from any party or candidate about unfair treatment in the political broadcasts. It was agreed between the Electoral Commissioner, SBC and the three

parties that there would be two 15-minute television and radio broadcasts by each presidential candidate, one at the beginning and the other at the end of the campaign period. In addition, each National Assembly candidate would have a five-minute party political broadcast slot on television and radio and each party would be allowed ten 60-second free spots to canvass votes and one 20-minute broadcast of a rally of the party's choosing. Airtime was free of charge but SBC levied production charges. Parties were allowed paid advertising of their meetings.

The Managing Director of SBC also told the Group that other areas of programming were adjusted for the sake of fairness to all political parties. For example, the signature tunes the parties adopted were banned from the SBC's playlists and Ministers had been informed that during the campaign period, the SBC would cover ministerial events but omit any political messages contained in their speeches.

The SBC exercised no censorship over any PPB, only omitting on two occasions, and after consulting the candidates, words which were considered either defamatory or likely to provoke civil unrest. It also relinquished editorial control over the production of the 20-minute programmes on party rallies.

We should also record with appreciation that the SBC broadcast in full, on both television and radio, our Chairperson's Interim Statement on the evening of 22 March prior to the declaration of the results.

Given the limited number of hours of television airtime SBC is to be commended for providing equal opportunities for all parties to put across their points of view during PPBs. We felt, however, that uncensored access to equal airtime was only a first step towards the development of a responsible public broadcasting service and that further steps should be taken towards the more objective airing of issues and events which impact on the political and social landscape as a whole.

### ***The Print Media***

In comparison with the SBC, the print media played a more subsidiary role in the campaign period. The trilingual *Seychelles Nation*, published by the Ministry of Finance and Communications, continues to be the only daily newspaper. It had been criticised by the opposition parties for only publishing government news but during the campaign period appeared to have made a conscious effort to give all parties equal space.

The SPPF and the two opposition parties had their own smaller papers or newsletters. *The People*, a fortnightly publication, promoted the SPPF; the monthly magazine *Seychelles Review* promoted the DP; and the weekly *Regar* strove to present itself as a professional newspaper but, with both its publisher and editor standing as United Opposition candidates in the elections, it was clear where its sympathies lay.