

Introduction

A Commonwealth role in the return to multi-party democracy in Lesotho effectively began at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Harare, Zimbabwe, in October 1991. Discussions took place there between the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, and the Head of Government of Lesotho, Major-General Elias P Ramaema, Chairman of the Military Council. As a result, on 15 November 1991 a formal invitation was addressed to the Secretary-General from the Government of Lesotho for the Commonwealth to provide technical assistance in the transition from military to civilian rule, and to observe the multi-party election which would form a fundamental component of that transition. Originally planned for mid-1992, the election was subsequently announced for 28 November 1992. However, this had to be postponed due to serious errors in computerisation of the voters' list. The election was finally held on 27 March 1993.

Commonwealth technical assistance focused on the preparations for and conduct of the election to come. It included the provision by the Commonwealth Secretariat of an elections adviser and a legal draftsman, and the identification of a Chief Electoral Officer funded by the British Government.

In response to the invitation to observe the general election, an initial planning mission from the Secretariat was sent to Lesotho by the Secretary-General from 3–6 March 1992. In accordance with usual practice, its purpose was to confirm that Commonwealth observers would be welcome, to identify issues for resolution before a credible election could be held and to determine the modalities for the operation of an observer group. Contact was made with the Government, with all political parties and other interested groups, and with officials who would be responsible for the organisation and conduct of the election. The mission subsequently reported to the Secretary-General that there was universal support for a Commonwealth observer group, which was seen by many as having the potential to make a constructive contribution to the success of the transition. The mission also drew attention to the pivotal role of an effective and credible registration process, the critical need for an independent electoral commissioner and an election commission, the right to free assembly by political parties, and the importance of access to the news media by those parties.

A second planning mission took place from 17–22 January 1993 to review the preparations for the election with the Government, the Chief Electoral

Officer and electoral officials, and the political parties. A final planning mission visited Lesotho from 13–16 March 1993 to ascertain in discussions with the Government and all the parties concerned that conditions would permit free and fair elections and a smooth transition to a stable democratic government thereafter. A news release issued as a result of this last mission is at *Annex I*.

The Observer Group

By 19 March 1993, our Group of 11 Observers and seven Secretariat support staff had all arrived in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, to begin on-the-ground preparations for observing the election. Before arriving in Lesotho, we had been briefed in London on the previous day by the Secretary-General, who had emphasised to us the importance of our task in observing Lesotho's proposed return to multi-party democracy after 16 years of one-party rule followed by seven years of military rule. The composition of the Group, including information about the Observers, is set out in *Annex II*.

The Secretary-General outlined to us in London our terms of reference, which were as follows:

The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the request of the Government of Lesotho and supported by all the major political parties. It is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the election in accordance with the law of Lesotho. It is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and determine in its own judgment whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the result of the election reflects the wishes of the people.

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 such elections.

The Group is to submit its report to the Secretary-General, who will forward it to the Government of Lesotho, to the leadership of the parties taking part in the election and thereafter to all Commonwealth governments.

Method of Work

On arrival in Lesotho, we issued our Arrival Statement which is at *Annex III*. Shortly after, the Group paid a courtesy call on the Minister of Finance and Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, The Hon Abel Thoahlane. Immediately thereafter, we began a full programme of meetings arranged by an advance team of Commonwealth Secretariat staff who had arrived in Lesotho prior to the main group. From Saturday 20 March until the evening of Tuesday 23 March, we met the leaders or representatives of all political parties, were briefed by the Chief Electoral Officer on preparations for the election, received a delegation of church leaders, and had discussions with other groups and individuals concerned with the election. On Wednesday 24 March, the Chair-

man and three members of the Group paid a courtesy call on the Head of Government and Chairman of the Military Council, Major-General Ramaema. The substance of these discussions and consultations is reflected as appropriate in succeeding chapters. A schedule of our engagements is at *Annex IV*.

Very early on Wednesday 24 March 1993, we divided into eight two-person teams and deployed to locations throughout the country. A news release and a schedule of these deployments are at *Annex V*. In seeking to achieve national coverage of the election by these eight teams, the nature of our task was determined both by the concentration of population in the western plains of Lesotho and by the mountainous terrain of the eastern two-thirds of the country. Despite its relative isolation and topography, this mountain region contains up to one-quarter of Lesotho's population and a similar proportion of the 65 electoral constituencies. Five of our eight teams were thus deployed in the western sector of the country and three in the mountains. While movement in the former was relatively easy (though not always so), travel in the latter, even in four-wheel drive vehicles, was both difficult and slow.

The stationing of observer teams throughout the country for almost three days before polling day on 27 March enabled the Group as a whole to make contact with relevant and concerned electoral officials, district and law enforcement officers, chiefs, candidates and party leaders at regional and local levels, and to visit almost all of the 65 electoral constituencies. In conducting our activities in the days before and on polling day, we focused our attention on various aspects of the election process guided by our observation notes and polling station check list (see *Annex VI*). Often, on many of the rural roads ours were the only vehicles in sight. All of our vehicles carried the distinctive blue and yellow Commonwealth logo, which was also printed on the pockets of our blue shirts, and on our arm bands, all of which became trademarks of our presence. We often stopped to chat with the villagers in their isolated hamlets. We received magnificent support from the relevant authorities in Lesotho, the fullest co-operation from electoral officials at the many polling stations we visited, and a warm welcome from the people of Lesotho wherever we went. (An eve-of-poll statement issued on 26 March is at *Annex VII*.)

We visited almost 300 polling stations on polling day and witnessed the count at 16 stations. On the basis of this coverage we issued an Interim Statement (*Annex VIII*) on 28 March stating our satisfaction with the conduct of the poll and the ability of the people of Lesotho to freely and fairly express their will.

While the Chairman and two members of the Group stayed behind to witness the transfer of power to the newly elected Government of Lesotho, the rest of the Group left Maseru on 1 April after finalising its full Report. A final statement issued before departure is at *Annex IX*.