

CHAPTER 4

The Poll and the Count

Any initial concern we had that the people of Lesotho appeared uninterested in the election was dispelled on polling day when hundreds, and in some places thousands, queued up at their polling stations long before the official opening time of 7 a.m. We saw old women wrapped up in blankets huddled together at the head of queues. Some said they had been there as early as 1 a.m., others at 4 a.m. We saw a man shuffling into the polling station with his paralysed father clasped in his arms; a daughter pushing her disabled mother in a wheelbarrow down a rough mountain road; and several women carrying their elderly mothers on their backs as they made the arduous trek to polling stations. We heard reports of people walking for 10 kilometres from polling station to station until they found their names on the voters' list and were able to vote.

By 7 a.m., a high proportion of the voters were already at polling stations throughout the country, all eager to exercise a right that had been denied them for the past 23 years. This auspicious beginning was unfortunately marred by the failure of numerous polling stations to open on time. Some in the mountainous districts did not open until the next day, a decision taken by the Chief Electoral Officer in the light of events. The delays were due to several factors: late delivery of election material, inadequate transport, shortage of supplies such as indelible ink, official stamps and pads, batteries for integrity lamps and clocks, and missing or wrong voters' registration lists and ballot papers. But once supplies arrived and shortcomings were rectified, the voting process went smoothly, albeit in many instances excruciatingly slowly as cautious and inexperienced polling officials followed every rule in the book. The late opening, the meticulousness of the staff and the high turnout all meant that polling and counting went on well into the night. At numerous polling stations we met voters who had waited in line since 7 a.m. and were still inching forward in the late afternoon and early evening. What impressed us most was the patience, orderliness and quiet dignity that prevailed as the voters waited in the hot sun, going without food and water for as long as 13 hours and then having to trek home in the dark, very often through rough terrain. We did not meet any voter who had left a polling station without voting. Very few complained to us about the lateness and slowness. Many said they had waited for 23 years for this day, so what were a few more hours!

While we had visited nearly all the 65 constituencies and several polling sites in the first three days of our deployment, on polling day itself we covered

almost 300 polling stations, about 17 per cent of the 1,778 stations. Several of these were tents set up in fields and plains to cater for voters from villages where there were no halls or buildings big enough to be used as polling stations. We traversed the length and breadth of our constituencies, along the good roads of the western border towns, up and down unpaved mountain and rural roads that often seemed to lead to nowhere in our search for polling stations in the remote constituencies. We spoke with polling officials, party agents and voters. Many who had cast their ballots were still hanging around the precincts of the polling stations, just to soak up the atmosphere of this long-awaited day. We did not meet anyone who complained about any incident of intimidation, pressure or fraud.

There was, however, some confusion about opening and closing times. Some voters said they had heard on the radio that voting would start at 8 a.m., but we ascertained that this announcement was only for absentee voting conducted on 24 and 25 March. Several voters were also under the impression that polling stations would stay open into the night and therefore took their time to turn up to cast their votes, only to find that stations were already closed and counting was under way. It seemed they had misunderstood the announcement that polling stations would remain open into the night only to benefit voters who were already standing in line at 5 p.m., the official closing time.

Late Opening of Polling Stations

Many polling stations in all districts opened late and some only accessible to supply by helicopter opened the next day. Surprisingly, the problem was particularly acute in Maseru where many polling stations did not open until late in the morning. In certain polling stations ballot boxes were not delivered until mid-morning and in one constituency, where 16 tents had been set up to serve as stations, hardly a single chair or table was in sight. Since this was the largest urban and most developed area in Lesotho, the late delivery of voting material led to allegations in some quarters that this was a deliberate attempt at rigging. At polling stations in other districts, and especially in the mountainous and rural areas, transport was the main problem. Several District Electoral Officers did not receive all the four-wheel drive vehicles promised to them. We were told that Principal Secretaries of the various ministries were supposed to have released government vehicles under their control at the district level for delivery of election material; but a few did not give the orders or gave them too late. With 26 March, the day before polling day, declared a public holiday to enable voters to go home to vote, many drivers could not be found to make up the missing numbers. In Mohale's Hoek, Quthing and Qacha's Nek, in particular, the helicopters needed for delivery to polling stations in inaccessible mountainous areas did not arrive as promised. The first helicopter arrived in Mohale's Hoek at 2.30 p.m. on polling day and could not reach all the polling stations in the remaining daylight hours. As a result, 31 polling stations in two constituencies there had to begin polling the next day.

Many polling stations throughout the country did not receive supplies of official stamps and pads. This delayed voting as each ballot paper had to be marked with the official stamp of the Electoral Office of Lesotho. At some stations, polling did not begin until the missing stamps and pads were delivered. At others, Presiding Officers consulted party agents to obtain their agreement that an official signature would be acceptable in place of a stamp. Some stations also did not receive ballot papers, registration lists and indelible ink. This caused further delays in opening. In a few polling stations, the electoral specialists in our Group made suggestions which assisted in resolving difficulties or improving procedures.

Given the experience of 1970, it was not surprising that allegations of rigging could be heard when polling stations failed to open on time. In Maseru, for example, it was alleged that the civil servants were mostly BNP supporters who wanted to sabotage the election in order to prevent a BCP victory. However, the shortcomings causing delays were in our view mainly of a technical nature and should be seen in the context of a country that had seen no election for nearly 23 years. The Chief Electoral Officer was badly in need of experienced officials, but there were very few civil servants available with experience in organising an election, let alone fully aware of the logistical challenges. It was significant that once adequate and appropriate supplies arrived, polling went on smoothly and no party agent had any complaints about the procedure or even the slow speed of voting in many places.

Performance of Electoral Officials

We were all impressed with the electoral officials, who clearly carried out their duties with utmost care and dedication. Many of them were women, and large numbers, both women and men, were teachers who were officiating in their own schools. It could be said that only a few of the electoral officials had conducted an election before; but it was obvious that most had been well-trained and all were careful to conduct their duties in a manner that would put them above suspicion. If anything, they erred on the side of caution. They were meticulous, often to a fault; many therefore took an inordinately long time to process each voter. Following their instructions to the letter, Presiding Officers explained to each voter what was on the ballot paper column by column, how the vote should be cast, including the choice of a cross or a tick to be placed in the appropriate square, how the ballot paper should be folded and brought back to the Presiding Officer, who would then tear off the top portion for record purposes and pass it back to the voter who would then fold the final flap, dip a finger into a bottle of indelible ink, and then stuff the ballot into the box. This laborious explanation and procedure sometimes took five minutes or even longer. When voters did not fold the paper properly, some Presiding Officers, instead of assisting them, directed them back to the polling booth to do it in secret according to procedure. A model of the ballot paper is at *Annex XII*.

One Presiding Officer in Qacha's Nek went to the extent of getting each voter to practise making crosses and ticks on the blackboard in the polling

station before he would issue a ballot paper. At several polling stations, only one voter at a time was allowed into the hall. Only when that voter exited would the next voter be called in. Long queues therefore moved at a snail's pace. However, a marked difference was often noted in the pace and performance by the afternoon. As Presiding Officers became familiar with the system and grew in confidence, voters were processed more quickly. Several would be called in at a time and instructions were given to voters in groups of five or ten instead of individually as a ballot paper was being issued.

If the process often seemed too slow and laborious to us, it hardly seemed to bother either the party agents or the voters. A few did complain about the slowness and pointed to their hungry stomachs, but they remained good-natured about it all. Equally, we received no complaints about electoral officials departing from procedures. There was no trace of suspicion surrounding any one of the thousands of officials serving in polling stations that day. Their performance was most commendable.

Adequacy of Voters' List

The continual corrections made to the voters' list, and the last-minute amendment to allow those with registration certificates but whose names did not appear on the list to vote, ensured that almost all those who turned up to vote were able to do so. In the polling stations visited, very few reported any significant number of registered voters with names missing from the list. According to procedure, when this occurred their names were duly recorded and they were allowed to vote. Only at one polling station in Mokhotlong did we witness a Presiding Officer turning away such voters. When this began to cause agitation among those waiting in the long line outside, one of our Observers was able to persuade the Presiding Officer to accept the voters in accordance with the proper interpretation of the rules.

Secrecy of the Ballot

Various means were used to ensure that voters could mark their ballot papers in secret. In polling stations with connecting doors to adjoining rooms, these second rooms were used as polling booths. In others, proper three-sided polling booths with curtains for privacy were supplied by the Electoral Office. In yet others, makeshift polling booths, made up of cardboard and blackboards and propped up by tables and chairs, were constructed. We saw no instance where the secrecy of the ballot was in any way compromised.

Performance of Party Agents

The agents for the two main parties, BNP and BCP, were present at almost all the polling stations visited. Party agents were co-operative and friendly, reflecting the absence of antipathy between the two parties at the local level. Very often only the agent of one party had the voters' list with him or her and

this was readily shared with the agents of other parties. They all kept a watchful eye on the proceedings and were often consulted by Presiding Officers in cases that might lead to a dispute in the interpretation of the rules. In their keenness to witness every step of the process, many insisted on sitting very close opposite the electoral officials.

The diligence and correctness of electoral officials facilitated the task of the party agents. It was therefore hardly surprising that we received almost no complaints from candidates or agents. There was, however, an incident at a polling station in Thaba-Tseka where the Presiding Officer had to evict a party agent for campaigning among the voters standing outside. Another agent from his party then replaced him.

Security Presence

The security presence in most polling stations was unobtrusive. Special Constables were appointed to assist Presiding Officers to maintain order at polling stations. They were most helpful in facilitating the flow of voters into the stations. There were many stations with no security presence at all, but this did not seem to pose a problem. Some stations had policemen in uniform in close proximity, often marshalling the queues, but many of them had placed their rifles behind the door, out of sight of voters. None were at all threatening. At one polling station, the Presiding Officer asked the party agents whether they minded the presence of an armed policeman in uniform who was a last-minute replacement for the Special Constable. Given the good mood and trust that prevailed on the day, nobody felt his presence was intimidating.

Conduct of the Count

Due to the late opening, counting started late and in the dark at numerous polling stations. Where there was no electric supply, gas lamps and candles had to be used. Some stations had not been supplied with these or with adequate tally sheets and official forms to report the results. Counting was therefore further delayed; but tireless polling officials and party agents carried on with the count without any break for rest or refreshments.

Counting at stations was conducted in slightly different ways. Some Presiding Officers put the ballots into separate piles for each candidate, and only then started the counting. Others marked the tally sheet as each ballot was opened. At designated stations, the ballots of absentee voters were mixed with the regular ballots to ensure the secrecy of the vote. At all stations where we witnessed the counting from start to finish, Presiding Officers were scrupulous in showing the party agents every ballot opened and then placing them in the right pile. Each agent had a tally sheet to record the count for each candidate. There were recounts at several stations because the number of ballot papers did not match the tally on the sheets. In many cases, this was due to the printing error in the tally sheet where the numbers, which were being counted in fives,

jumped from 60 to 70, instead of to 65.

A most remarkable feature of the count was the minuscule number of rejected ballot papers, and these usually because they were blank. It was obvious that the voter education programmes conducted by election officials, party agents and traditional leaders and the final instructions given by each Presiding Officer to each voter had been highly effective. This resulted in ticks and crosses that were neatly and carefully marked in the small square in the middle of the appropriate column. Very few voters had made a different mark or placed a mark anywhere else.

This extraordinarily low number of invalid votes plus the outstanding turnout of 72 per cent belie the quiet and seeming indifference that marked the last few days before polling. What became clear to all of us was that the people of Lesotho, in their quiet determination, knew exactly what they wanted to do and how they would do it.