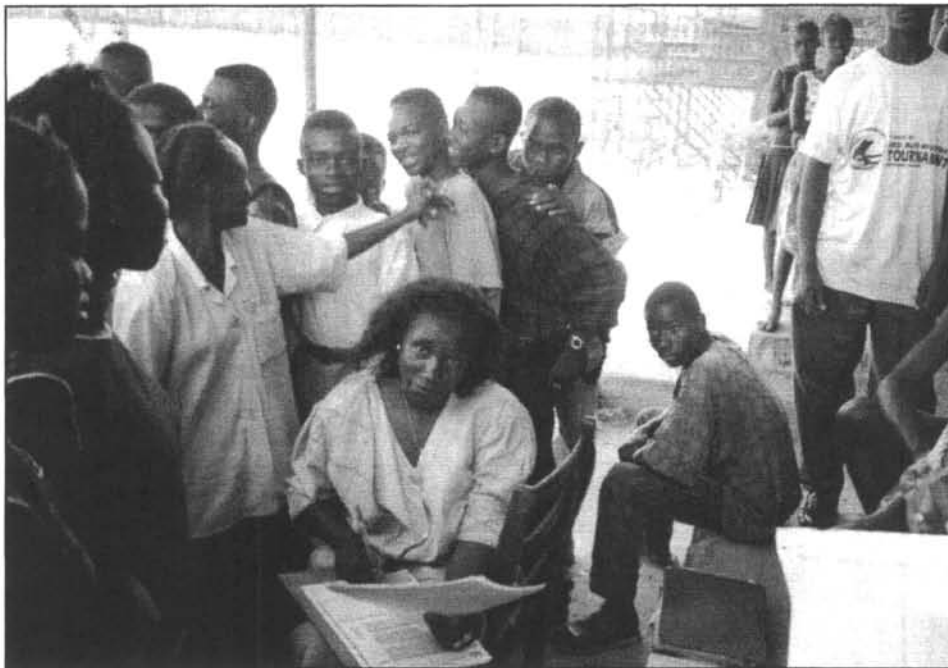


Chapter 3

Preparations for the Elections

The Registration of Electors

For the purposes of registration, the country was divided into 2,553 Registration Areas. INEC appointed two registrars in each rural area and four in each urban area. In all 5,866 registrars were appointed and trained. In addition, there were also 20 co-ordinators and 350 Team Leaders. Registration Offices were established in the District and Chiefdom headquarter towns.



Late additions ... last minute registration of voters. Following complaints of under-registration a five-day 'supplementary registration period' was held immediately prior to the elections. More than 90,000 additional voters were added to the list

The chosen method of registration was that teams of registrars should visit people's homes to establish precisely who was entitled to be registered.

The process began in December 1995 but some problems were encountered in certain areas due to rebel activities. These security problems together with complaints from eligible electors alleging that they were out when registrars called and would therefore be disfranchised, led to an extension of the registration period until 31 January 1996. The method of registration was then reviewed and revised. Registration centres were established and people came to the registrars. This was a sensible arrangement and met the criticism of the

political parties that the door-to-door method of registration was inadequate. This change also assisted newly displaced people.

The next stage was the production and display of voters' lists. INEC used specially designed, computerised registration forms and high-speed scanners to process the information obtained by the registrars. This improved the accuracy of the processing and avoided the many errors associated with the manual inputting of data. The scanning took three weeks.

After the publication of the draft registers there were further complaints about under-registration, particularly in the south and east. This was understandable in view of the serious security problems in some areas. Registrars simply could not visit certain areas in safety.

The draft registers were displayed from 19-23 February, during which period names could be added to the register. Commonwealth Observers witnessed the later stages of this additional registration exercise.

In Bo, at the Coronation Field registration site, young girls dressed in school uniform were able to register unchallenged despite looking much younger than 18 years. While it is sometimes difficult to determine whether or not a voter is of the requisite age, our observers in Bo were unanimous in their view that children as young as 14 years were being registered at this site.



Training ... here an instructor from INEC trains polling officials. INEC enjoyed widespread public confidence and a reputation for independence while its Chairman, Dr James Jonah, acquired the status of a national hero for his integrity and his determination to stick to the election timetable

This failure to detect under age registration can be explained in part by the enormous pressure registration officials were facing. However, there can be no excuse for failing to ask pertinent questions about the age of an elector when he or she appears to be under age. The registration officials were trained to ask such questions, but in this respect they did not carry out their duties.

The registration of under-age voters was not restricted to Bo, as borne out by the other Commonwealth teams operating in different regions where under age voting was detected. However, the numbers of such under age persons being registered as voters were not significant, according to our observations.

It proved impossible for the printed registers used on election day to include the names of those registered during the five-day supplementary registration period. Instead, the printed registers which had been displayed from 19-23 February were used in conjunction with the registration forms completed by those who had registered during the supplementary registration period. This was not due to problems with the technology used by INEC but to too tight a timetable.

Voter Education

The Commonwealth Group was briefed by an INEC official involved in the voter education programme. Television and radio broadcasts had been used and account was taken of language differences. A video recording was made on the polling process and this was used extensively. Members of the Group viewed the video and found it to be informative and effective.

Theatre groups were hired to visit towns and villages and INEC representatives attended many civic meetings. In addition, specially trained personnel had specimen ballot papers and other polling equipment which was used to inform the electorate on what they should expect on election day. The trainers concentrated on the layout of polling stations and the procedures to be followed on polling day.



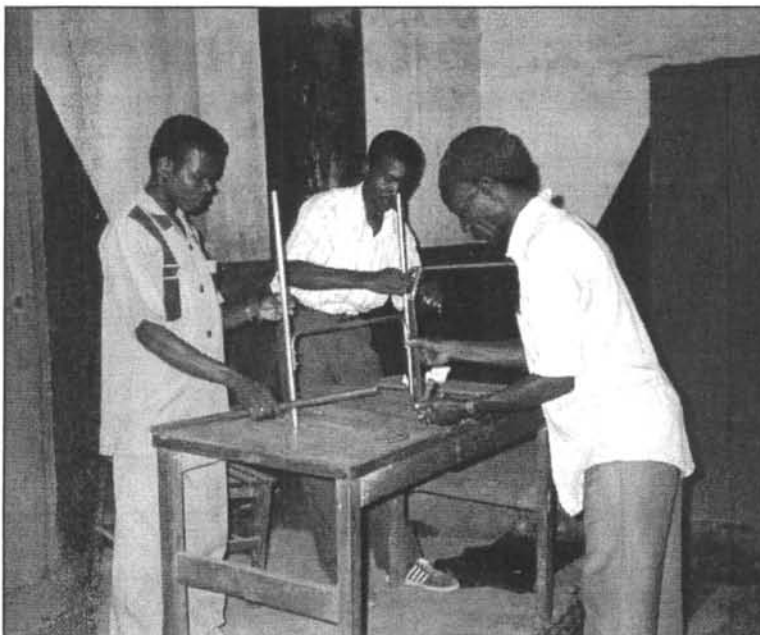
Rehearsal ... a mock polling station set up by instructors from INEC provides polling officials with a realistic idea of conditions on polling day. Training sessions such as this were organised throughout the country in the run-up to the elections

Particular attention was paid to the marking of the ballot paper, the way in which the ballot paper should be folded and the difference in the colour of the papers and the ballot boxes, distinguishing the Presidential ballots and ballot boxes from those to be used for the Parliamentary elections.

Political parties also held meetings of their supporters where the process was explained. One team attended a women's meeting where civic leaders and others demonstrated the voting process to interested women and men.

The Group was also briefed by the National Commission for Democracy (NCD). Posters produced by NCD were visible, particularly in Freetown, and the Group was advised that the NCD's role was to deal with the broader programme of civic education.

INEC made presentations to the Press and political parties on the electoral system to be used and produced a small handbook



Setting up ... all the election day equipment came in special kits: here polling assistants practice assembly of the metal frame for the screened-off polling booth in which voters would mark their ballot papers

on the voting process which was distributed throughout the country. It was encouraging to see ordinary members of the public reading and discussing the booklet.

When a country moves to multi-party democracy, voter education plays an important role in ensuring the smooth running of the electoral process. In a country like Sierra Leone where an estimated 80 per cent of the voters are illiterate, effective and well targeted voter education is crucial. INEC made efforts to ensure that the voters were properly educated in the voting process. The Group did witness some confusion among certain electors, particularly the elderly. This is understandable especially since these were complex elections and the system was new to the voters. It also indicates the need for a continuing voter education programme within Sierra Leone.

The Competence of Election Officials

The division of responsibility for the organisation of the electoral process was as follows:

Presidential Elections Returning Officer	–	Chairman of INEC
National Parliamentary Returning Officer	–	Chairman of INEC
Provincial Returning Officers	–	INEC Provincial Commissioners
District Returning Officers	–	INEC District Election Officers

The District Returning Officers had the responsibility for the day to day organisation of the elections, including the recruitment of Presiding Officers and polling assistants.

It was obvious to the Group that training of Presiding Officers and polling assistants had come a little too late, in a number of instances. Trainers were trained centrally and that training was then cascaded throughout the regions. The Group witnessed training taking place on the day before the elections. There was not sufficient time to digest information, consider problems and ask meaningful questions. On the first day of the poll our Group witnessed on-the-job training of polling assistants. One Presiding Officer voted on an unstamped ballot paper and there was indecision over certain problems.

However, such incidents were few and staff proved to be efficient in the vast majority of cases and areas. A high level of competence was generally displayed at all levels.

The staff were as determined as the electorate to ensure that the elections were held and conducted properly. All officials showed remarkable courage in carrying out their duties. All election staff were under threat of attack. During the week before election day, shots were fired at the home of the Chairman of INEC and a grenade was thrown at the INEC offices in Freetown. Earlier, registration officials had been threatened. On election day itself polling was disrupted by rebel attacks, people were killed in attacks on the outskirts of towns and in town centres – and yet polling continued. This required determination and conspicuous courage on the part of the voters and all the officials connected with polling.

On election day, polling staff accompanied by party agents were seen leaving their stations with sealed ballot boxes on their heads, determined that these should not fall into the hands of those intent on disrupting the elections. After the battles died down they were seen returning to their stations with the boxes intact, along with accompanying party agents, to resume voting. Others carried on polling even while gunfire and mortar attacks were taking place not so far away. In certain cases the polls could not be opened on time because of attacks by rebels which began early in the day to cause as much disruption as possible. And yet when the firing subsided the election work resumed.

The Group came to have the highest regard for the courage and persistence of the INEC staff, from Chairman to polling assistants.