

Chapter 6

The Poll and Count

The polling stations were supposed to open for voting to commence at 7 a.m. on 26 February 1996. But only in a very few instances in the areas that we observed was this the case. In most stations voting did not begin before 9 a.m. and in some cases even much later. The delays had to do with INEC's logistical and resource problems. Where road transport could be used the necessary military escorts to provide security were often lacking. The military authorities argued that they needed all available men and material to provide security against rebel attacks. Then truck owners who had been contracted to transport election material refused to let their trucks move without military escort. In the cases where truck owners were prepared to allow the use of their vehicles they tended to demand extortionate sums from INEC. The grounding of the helicopters three days before polling day allegedly on the basis of security advice from the military added to the problems of transportation. But once the polling stations were opened, voting proceeded smoothly.

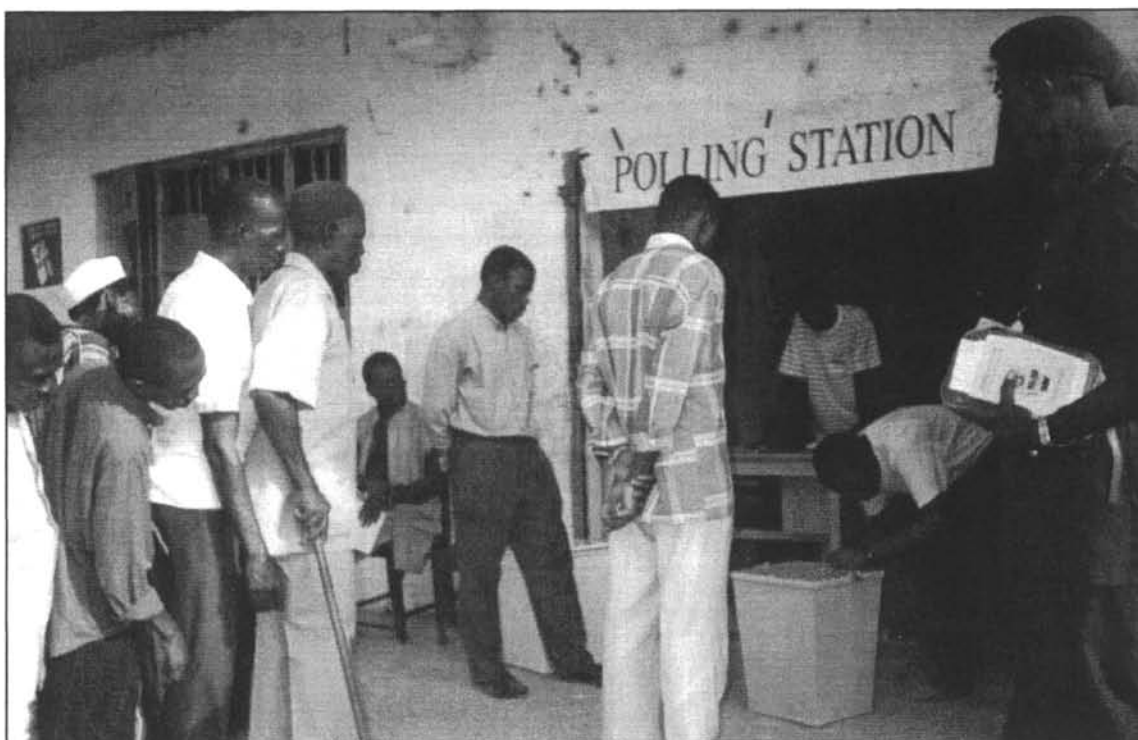
While the polling stations were late in opening, almost invariably the voters were early in arriving. Some voters told us that they had been in the queues from as early as 5.30 a.m. Many of them were to remain in the queues for the greater part of the day.

Layout and Facilities

In the great majority of cases, the voting centres consisted of schools and other public buildings and the occasional private house. The layout was uneven. Some places were spacious and therefore allowed for a layout which facilitated the flow of voters. Others, especially those in the refugee camps, were usually cramped, greatly restricting the movement of voters. Some voting centres had no electricity and the lanterns which were provided were of little help when it came to counting the votes at the close of poll. Where there were particularly long queues, these added to the pressures on the available space. These difficulties notwithstanding the mood in the polling booths was one of good cheer and a determination not to allow any inconvenience to stand in the way of the elections.

Logistics ... a removal van owned by Let's Live Transport is put to work delivering election kits. INEC had to overcome formidable logistical problems. Air transport was limited, road transport was hazardous and there were too few vehicles. On the eve of the election INEC's helicopter flights were stopped and some vehicles were withdrawn by their owners on security grounds





Sealed shut ... ballot boxes are sealed prior to the commencement of voting at a polling station in Koidu in Sierra Leone's Eastern Province. Separate ballot boxes and ballot papers were used for the Presidential and Parliamentary elections

The Electoral Officials

The Presiding Officers and polling assistants were mostly teachers. In many cases they had been recruited and trained a little late in the day and this showed in some of the initial errors which they made early on in polling. However, as the day wore on they quickly overcame these limitations. In their approach to their work, they displayed considerable industry and even greater patience. The great majority of the voters were illiterate and required considerable help to understand the procedures involved in voting. The Presiding Officers and polling assistants made it a point to explain carefully and in detail the method of voting, including even the way the ballot paper was to be folded. To avoid confusion as to which ballot paper was to go into which box, the polling officials first issued the Presidential and then the Parliamentary ballot paper.¹ In our observation, the polling officials were not only anxious to be doing the right thing, they were also anxious to be seen doing it. They followed the guidelines to the letter and in the process gained the confidence of the party agents. The punctiliousness of the polling officials meant that voting proceeded at a much slower pace; but they believed it was better to proceed at a slower pace and to deliver a credible election. So did we.

¹ Voters first presented their voter registration document and, to prevent multiple voting, their hands were checked for traces of indelible ink. A small hole was punched in the voter registration document and the voter was issued with a ballot paper for the Presidential election. This was stamped and signed by the polling assistant and the voter marked the paper in the polling booth. After casting this ballot in the Presidential election ballot box the voter was issued with the ballot paper for the Parliamentary election, marked this in a second polling booth, deposited the paper in a second ballot box and had his or her index finger marked with indelible ink.



Balloting in Bo ... an orderly queue at a polling station on the outskirts of Bo. Prior to the elections the political parties complained that voter education was inadequate. INEC agreed that it would have liked to have done more, blaming cuts to its planned programme on the slow response of the international community in providing funds for the elections

Peaceful Port Loko ... voters queue in peace at a polling station in Port Loko, Northern Province, as voting begins on 26 February. But nearby the presence of armed men had prompted local people to flee into the bush and forced INEC to abandon plans to establish a number of polling stations. There was shooting in some major centres, including the two biggest cities





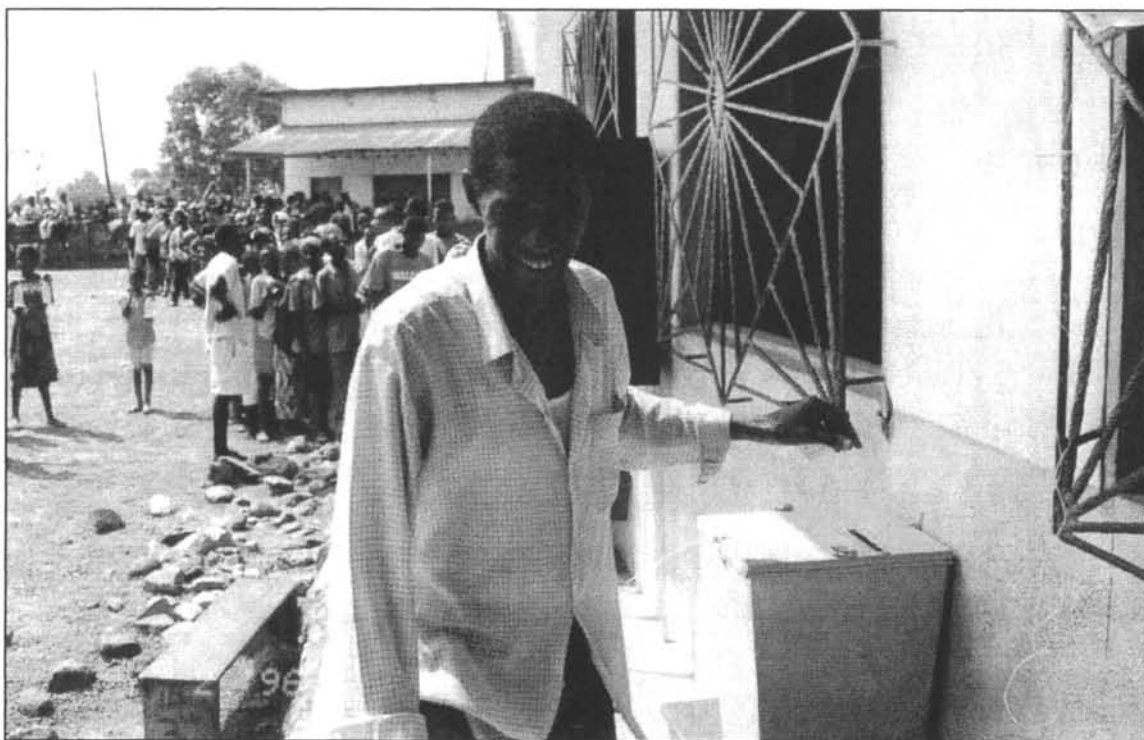
Helping hand ... a senior citizen gets a helping hand from a young man in Bo. The Presidential and Parliamentary Elections were held simultaneously on 26 and 27 February, with a run-off for the post of President on 15 March 1996

Party Agents

Most political parties ensured that they had party agents at the polling stations. These were for the most part young men and women and brought to their task the enthusiasm and single mindedness typical of youth. It has been said that party representatives at polling stations are the front line of democracy. If that is true, the cause of democracy in Sierra Leone could not have been more vigilantly guarded. When shooting broke out in Bo, Kenema and parts of Freetown on polling day, it was usually the party agents, acting in mutual partnership, who put the higher national interest above their respective party allegiances and carried the ballot boxes to safety. Not only were they at the polling stations hours before the opening of the polls, some of them slept in the polling stations to ensure that the ballot boxes were not tampered with. Their role called for sacrifices, including going without meals for practically the whole day, a price they seemed ready to pay with equanimity.

The dedication of the polling officials and the party agents was matched by that of the voters. All the ranks were represented – the young, the middle aged and the old, all united in a common hope of a future of democracy and accountable governance and a common fear of arbitrary rule.

Worth the wait ... after his long wait in the queue this voter in the Northern Province finally deposits his ballot paper in the ballot box. As here, many polling stations were in the open air



For the young and even many of the middle aged this was their first experience of a free and democratic election. The lengths to which they went to ensure that they cast their vote is a measure of the value they placed on the opportunity. The resolution and courage of the voters where security risks were high compelled admiration. The ordinary men and women who voted are the true heroes of these elections.

Security Presence and Secrecy of the Ballot

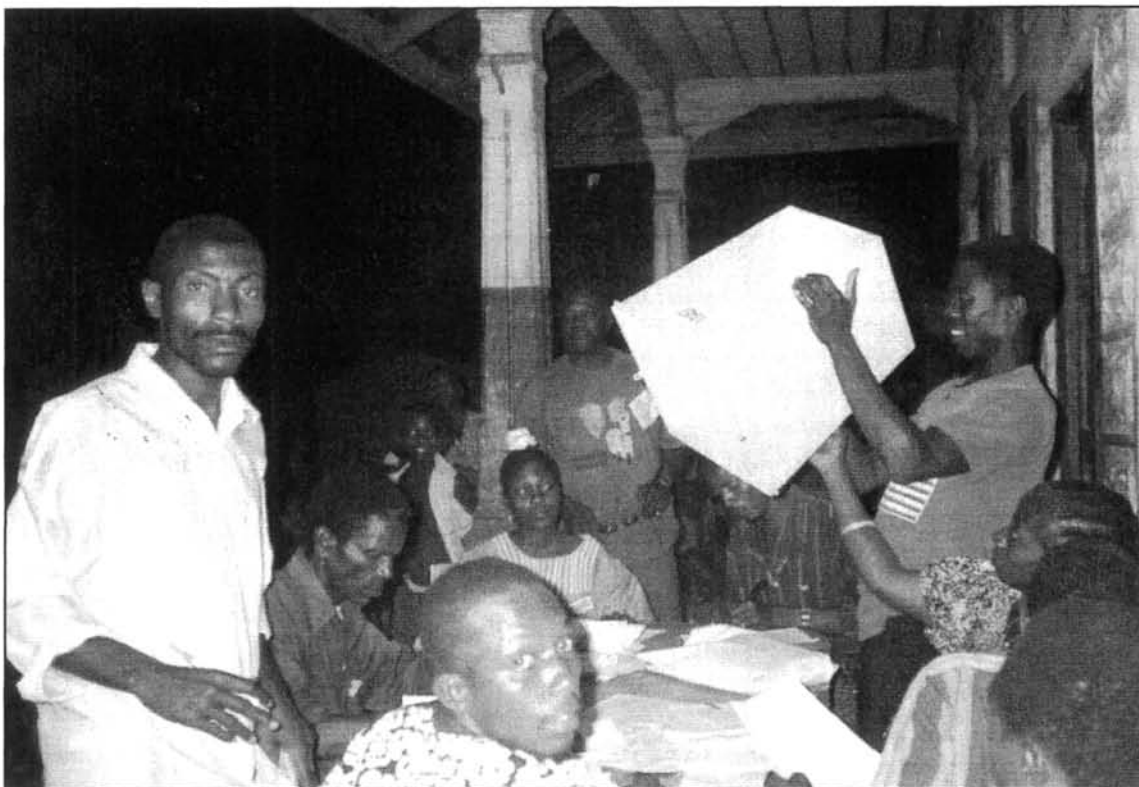
Security at the polling stations was in the hands of the police. Their presence was discreet but effective. They controlled the crowds with diligence and in a way which made for mutual confidence without which the elections would not have been as peaceful as they turned out to be.

The polling booths were arranged in a way to ensure maximum secrecy. They had been specially designed for the purpose and no voter to our knowledge complained of lack of secrecy. We received few reports of fraud and personation.

In Kenema and Makeni, RUF attacks on nearby villages sent large numbers of people into the towns, a massive influx which changed the whole election picture. In Kenema, the INEC Regional Commissioner and his team decided to allow the displaced persons to vote. This meant making provision for scores of additional polling stations at the last minute. It also meant that the registration list could no longer be used because it was not possible to apportion voters to specific polling stations and be assured of having the right registration list there. The electoral officers had to improvise and create new lists backed by appropriate identification by voters. Although this was not the prescribed method, we were satisfied that it did not impair the fairness of the elections. In the case of Bo the RUF carried the war into the heart of the town, drawing forth a spirited defence from the townspeople. They succeeded in beating off the attack (as they had done in the past) and returned to the queues to resume voting. We believe that nothing better demonstrates the dogged determination of the people of this country to achieve democracy.

Security ... in some parts of Sierra Leone the police and military were augmented by 'kamajors', traditional security forces co-ordinated by paramount chiefs. Their presence appeared to be of considerable reassurance to voters, some of whom believed that the powers of these fighters included the ability to deflect bullets





Cleaned out ... an election official demonstrates to the watching crowd that all ballot papers have been removed from the box prior to counting. Counts were conducted at the polling stations themselves

Out in the open ... counting the votes. Throughout the country the count was conducted with commendable transparency, always in full view of party agents and often in the presence of large crowds of voters who could see for themselves that all was above board



The Count

The prevailing security situation made it practically impossible for some teams to observe the count in their respective areas. In the case of Bo the mid-day attack put an end to all observation. However, the teams that were able to observe the count did so. The process was slow, as again the electoral officials insisted in following the procedures meticulously. Each ballot paper was opened and shown to the assembled party agents for inspection. Inevitably this too slowed down the process but the care was necessary to assure all the interested parties that fair play was being done. It also enabled the party agents to record the tallies as an additional check on the count. Transparency was the watchword and the count concluded a process which was by and large a model of integrity.²

² Voting hours on the scheduled election day, Monday 26 February, were extended from 6.00 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. and then into the following day, Tuesday 27 February. Counting took place after the closure of the polls on both days.