
Introduction

The renewed commitment by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their 1989 Meeting in Kuala Lumpur to strengthen the democratisation processes in member states continues to be an important catalyst for political change in Commonwealth countries. Since then, a number of governments have formally requested the Commonwealth Secretary-General to provide assistance in a variety of ways, including the mounting of Commonwealth Observer Groups for their elections. Since 1989, the Commonwealth has sent such Observer missions to Malaysia, Bangladesh, Zambia and Seychelles, and preparations are in hand to observe national elections in Ghana, Kenya and Lesotho. Under the Special Commonwealth Fund for Mozambique, the Commonwealth has also assisted in preparations for multi-party democracy in that country.

The Commonwealth's involvement in the electoral process in Guyana began with a request in July 1990 from President Hugh Desmond Hoyte that a Commonwealth mission observe the conduct of the next general election. The request was made amid intense local and international pressure on the Government to ensure that such elections should be free and fair. In accordance with Secretariat practice, a Planning Mission, headed by Sir Anthony Siaguru, Deputy Secretary-General (Political), visited Guyana in September 1990 to consult with major political parties and a wide cross-section of interested groups. It concluded that the presence of a Commonwealth Observer Group, as well as other observer groups, would not only be welcomed but also be important in efforts to enhance public confidence in the electoral process as a whole.

The mission, however, noted widespread scepticism that free and fair elections could be held under the existing laws. It also noted that opposition parties and interested groups had greater expectations of the role and functions of an observer group. They emphasised the need for observers to conduct a thorough examination of the electoral laws and structures, including the procedures adopted at each stage of the entire electoral process, beginning with the registration of voters and continuing until the declaration of the results. They also considered it necessary for international observers to be present from the beginning of the compilation of the voters' list.

Subsequently, five Commonwealth missions visited Guyana in April, October and November 1992, and in March and July 1992 to assess the progress being made in the various stages of preparation of the voters' list. Some of the recommendations of these missions were reflected in a number of electoral reforms implemented by the Government.

Composition of Observer Group and Terms of Reference

It was against this background that our Group of 16 was constituted by the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, to observe the 1992 general and regional elections of Guyana. The composition of the Group and our support staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat is set out in *Annex I*. We were given the following Terms of Reference:

The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the request of the Government of Guyana and supported by the political parties. It is to observe every relevant aspect of the organisation and conduct of the elections in accordance with the laws of Guyana relating to the elections. Its function is to ascertain whether, in its impartial judgment and in the context of that law, the elections have been free and fair.

The Group has no executive role; its function is neither to supervise nor to act as a commission of inquiry but to observe the process as a whole and to form a judgment accordingly. It is to submit its report initially to the Secretary-General and to the Government of Guyana, and thereafter to the leadership of the parties taking part in the elections.

We were conscious of the challenging task before us, and especially of the fact that our Terms of Reference represented a wide range of the election processes that we were to observe and to report on. We were particularly conscious of the difficulties in transport and communications, especially in the interior regions, where access to most polling stations required air or boat charter. Guyana, with an estimated total population of 793,000 has an area of 214,970 sq km. It has three distinct areas – the coastal belt, the forest area and the savannah zone. The narrow coastal belt, which is generally about 16 km in width (though it runs inland for up to 64 km along the banks of the main rivers) accounts for only four per cent of the total area and contains 90 per cent of the population. As a result, about 85 per cent of the total electorate of 384,002 voters were in five regions in the coastal belt; the remaining 15 per cent were dispersed throughout the interior. We were confident, however, that adequate arrangements could be made to monitor an acceptably wide cross-section of the electorate. We were encouraged in this belief by the fact that some members of our Group, as well as some members of the Secretariat support team, had had previous experience in observing elections or had been members of one or more of the five Commonwealth missions that had previously visited Guyana.

Regional elections were held simultaneously alongside the general election. A combined colour-coded ballot paper was used in the two elections so that every elector was entitled to cast two votes, one in respect of each of the two elections. Apart from this, no separate arrangements were made for the regional elections. Votes were cast at the same time and the marked ballot paper was then placed, undetached, in one ballot box. The ballot papers were only separated during the count. We therefore observed the regional elections,

the results of which would eventually determine who would represent each region in Parliament in accordance with the existing constitutional provisions, as we did the general election.

Method of Work

Most of our Group assembled in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, on 21 September while en route to Guyana. There, we were briefed by the Commonwealth Secretary-General who emphasised to us the importance of our observation exercise for democracy in Guyana and the rest of the Commonwealth, and our responsibility to discharge our task in an impartial manner. He saw our role as part of a process of strengthening democratic institutions in the Commonwealth. We also had useful initial discussions with Mr Carl Dundas, the leader of the Secretariat support staff, and one of his colleagues, Mr Richard Nzerem, who had been a member of previous Commonwealth missions to Guyana.

Twelve members of our Group and six Commonwealth Secretariat support staff arrived in Georgetown on 22 September. Our Chairman, Mr David Peterson, and two other members arrived on 27 September, and the last member three days later. Until the arrival of Mr Peterson, Mrs Shirley Miller served as Acting Chair. Four support staff, who preceded us to set up our office and prepare for our arrival, had already made useful contacts, and we found a full programme of meetings awaiting us. From the outset, we recognised that detailed consultations with as many participants in the electoral process as possible would alert us to the concerns of political parties and in turn determine the scope and manner of our coverage of events on polling day. A letter had been issued on our behalf by the advance team to all political parties inviting them to discuss their concerns with us (*Annex II*), and we were able to meet with the leaders of nine of the 11 contending political parties. They all welcomed our presence and we kept in touch with them or their representatives throughout our stay. Wherever possible, we also attended some of the political rallies held in Georgetown and elsewhere at which we spoke freely with party officials, members and supporters. We met with President Hoyte, Commissioner of Police Laurie Lewis and senior officers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and maintained frequent contact with the Elections Commission. We met with non-governmental agencies, including the Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB) and the Guyana Human Rights Association. A list of our more significant engagements is at *Annex III*.

We issued regular press releases (see *Annex IV*) to inform the media and the public of our activities. At all our meetings with officials and the media, we emphasised our impartiality and independence. We also liaised with the Observers from the Carter Center, especially on deployment of personnel, with the High Commissioners of Britain, Canada and India, and with the American Ambassador. We remained conscious at all times, however, of the need to preserve our independence as a separate Observer group and to form an independent judgment of the organisation and conduct of the elections.

Five days before polling day, Observers and support staff were deployed in teams of two to different parts of the country. Well in advance of polling day

we therefore had Observers established in Mabaruma (Region 1), Hampton Court (Region 2), the Corentyne (Region 6), Mahdia (Region 8), Lethem (Region 9) and Linden (Region 10). Four other teams covered the coastal belt, including Georgetown, and Region 7 was covered by a team which flew between the main population centres of that region. The objective was to cover as many polling stations as possible in each of the 10 Regions. A schedule of our deployment is at *Annex V*. Once deployed, we familiarised ourselves with the districts we were to cover on polling day, observed polling arrangements made by the local officials, and met political leaders and electoral officials. In our visits to the electoral areas and polling stations, both before and on polling day, we were guided by a Check List and Polling Station Report (*Annex VI*) in observing various aspects of the election process.

We were immediately recognised everywhere we went because of extensive media coverage of our arrival and activities. We travelled in vehicles which were clearly marked 'Commonwealth Observer Group' and we wore armbands similarly marked. Some of us wore specially made T-shirts embossed with the Commonwealth logo. We received the fullest possible co-operation from the public and the authorities and we were accorded complete freedom of movement and access to every aspect of the election machinery.

Relationship with other Observer Groups

We worked closely with Observers from the Carter Center and the Council of Freely Elected Heads of State under the joint leadership of former US President Jimmy Carter and Prime Minister George Price of Belize. We also met with unofficial Observers from the Guyana-Canada Friendship Association.