

Introduction

The Parliamentary elections in Cameroon on 17 May 1997 were the first national level elections held in that country since its admission to the Commonwealth in November 1995. These elections formed the first part of a two-phase electoral programme with a presidential election also due to take place later in the year.

The invitation to the Commonwealth to send observers for the parliamentary elections was issued by the Government of Cameroon on 15 April 1997. On 16 April 1997, the Secretary-General wrote to the Government of Cameroon welcoming the invitation and advising them that he would send an Assessment Mission to consult with all the major political parties 'in order to confirm their broad support for a Commonwealth observer presence and to foster a spirit of confidence and co-operation amongst all concerned.' The Mission would also make an initial assessment of the practical arrangements that would need to be made to facilitate the work of the Observers.

Consequently, four officials of the Commonwealth Secretariat visited Cameroon on 20-24 April 1997. They met representatives of major political parties, and other organisations and groups with an interest in the elections. All these supported the proposal that the Commonwealth should send an Observer Group for the parliamentary elections.

The Assessment Mission also held discussions with the Ministry of Territorial Administration (locally known as MINAT), the government body responsible for the administration of the elections, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of External Relations and the Ministry of Communications.

The context for the Secretary-General's positive response was set by:

- Commonwealth commitment to the promotion of fundamental political values set out in the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration and reinforced by Commonwealth Heads of Government in their Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme on the Harare Declaration adopted at their meeting in New Zealand in 1995, including 'democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, fundamental human rights, the rule of law and just and honest government';
- long-term involvement by the Commonwealth in encouraging and assisting the ongoing democratisation process in Cameroon.

The Observer Group and its Terms of Reference

It was in this context that the Secretary-General invited our Group of 12 Observers supported by nine staff from the Commonwealth Secretariat, to observe the 1997 parliamentary elections in Cameroon. The composition of the Group, which was led by the Hon Jean-Jacques Blais, a former Cabinet Minister of Canada, is set out at *Annex I*.

The terms of reference for our Group were incorporated in the Secretary-General's letter inviting each of us to participate in the mission and were as follows:

The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the request of the Government of Cameroon and supported by the major political parties. It is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the elections in accordance with the law of Cameroon. It is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and to determine in its own judgment whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the result of the elections 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 government and other concerned authorities such action on institutional,



Commonwealth Observer Group Chairperson Jean-Jacques Blais (far right) introduces Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku to some other members of the Group on arrival at Nsimalen International Airport ... (from left to right) Daivanaden Poinosawmy, Selwyn Jones and Bernardin Renaud

procedural and other matters as would assist the holding of the elections and thereafter the effective functioning of the elected government.

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

A press release announcing our mission was issued in London and Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, on 7 May 1997 (see *Annex II*).

Method of Work

Our Group assembled in London on Wednesday 7 May 1997 and was briefed by the Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General (Political), Mr K Srinivasan. We left London on Thursday 8 May and arrived in Yaoundé late that evening. On arrival at Nsimalen International Airport, we were fortunate to be able to meet with the Commonwealth Secretary-General who had attended an international conference and held bilateral talks with the Government in Yaoundé in the week prior to our arrival. The following day we issued an Arrival Statement (*Annex III*) at a press conference and began a series of briefings, beginning with a briefing by senior officials of the Ministry of Territorial Administration.

Thereafter, and until our deployment to the various regions of the country on Tuesday 13 May 1997, we met representatives of the main political parties contesting the elections, the

National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) including the Association of Women Jurists (ACAFEJ), the Union of Journalists of Cameroon (UJC) and the Cameroon Bar Association. We were also briefed by Commonwealth diplomats and other members of the diplomatic community, including the European Union. In addition, some members of our Group were briefed by the President of the Supreme Court.

On 13 May 1997, our Chairperson and some members of our Group who had not yet deployed met with the Vice-Prime Minister responsible for Territorial Administration, the Hon Gilbert Andze Tsoungui, to seek clarification of some of the points which had been raised with us during our earlier meetings.

Our Schedule of Engagements is at *Annex IV*.

Our Group was divided into ten teams of two, and on 13 and 14 May 1997, were deployed to all ten provinces in Cameroon. On 14-15 May our Chairperson and the leader of the Secretariat's team, who were based in Yaoundé, travelled to Bamenda in North-West Province to assess at first hand the state of electoral preparedness in that region. While in Bamenda they were briefed by political party officials.

On deployment, our teams met senior representatives of the Administration including Governors, Senior Divisional Officers (SDOs) and Divisional Officers (DOs) responsible for the administration of the elections; regional representatives of political parties; traditional leaders; religious and community leaders, as well as local NGO activists. Wherever possible we liaised with other international observer groups and those local observer groups which had been accredited by the Government. Prior to polling day, all teams travelled extensively throughout their designated regions in order to familiarise themselves with local conditions, assess the state of preparedness for the poll and observe the last days of the campaign. Each team reported regularly to base headquarters in Yaoundé. Details of our deployment and the statement issued by our Chairperson on deployment are at *Annex V*.

On 17 May 1997, our ten teams witnessed the opening of polling stations (scheduled for 8 a.m.) and their closure (scheduled for 6 p.m.) in all provinces of Cameroon. On 18 May our team in the Far North Province observed polling in Maroua Rural – the only region in which polling did not take place on 17 May. The reasons for this are fully explained in Chapter 5.

Throughout the day on 17 May, we visited over 350 polling stations at random, inspecting polling arrangements and consulting with Presiding Officers, electoral officials, party agents and the voters. We also observed the counting of votes at some polling stations that evening. In addition, some teams witnessed the compilation of constituency returns at the level of DOs,



Just one more thing ... the Commonwealth Observer Group Chairperson has a final word with members of the delegation from the Association of Women Jurists (ACAFEJ) after their briefing session

SDOs and by Divisional Supervisory Commissions. We were guided throughout our deployment by the Notes on Observation of the Poll and Count and the Check List both of which are reproduced at *Annex VI*.

On 18 May, all teams returned to Yaoundé in order to begin debriefing and commence consideration of our report before departing Cameroon on 22 May.

On the basis of our observations, our Chairperson issued an Interim Statement on 19 May. A copy of this statement appears at *Annex VII*. A Departure Statement was issued on 22 May and appears at *Annex VIII*.

Two members of the Observer Group, supported by two Secretariat staff, remained in Yaoundé after 22 May to observe the continuing process of tallying by the National Commission for the Final Counting of Votes, and the preparations for the official proclamation of results by the Supreme Court. Their report is at *Annex X*.

Co-operation with the *Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique* (ACCT)

Co-operation between the Commonwealth and other international organisations, in particular the *Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique* (ACCT), the secretariat of *La Francophonie*, had been planned prior to the arrival of our Observer Group in Yaoundé. In the event, we were pleased to be able to interact closely with the ACCT team, both in Yaoundé and in some of the Provinces to which they deployed. Further co-ordination and meetings between the two groups took place after the observation of the elections and there were valuable exchanges of information.