

Democracy: a cornerstone of the Commonwealth



Democracy, representative government, human rights, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and just and honest government are at the heart of the Commonwealth's fundamental political values, articulated in the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration. The Commonwealth Secretariat promotes democracy through advocacy of democratic principles and practical action to help make them a reality.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group

Unique among international organisations, the Commonwealth has a dedicated and high profile custodian body to monitor its own members' adherence to its values and respond where they appear to be at risk. The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on the Harare Declaration (CMAG) was set up in 1995 by Heads of Government at their meeting in Auckland, New Zealand, under the Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme on the Harare Declaration. CMAG's member states are represented by their Foreign Ministers.

At the March 2002 summit in Coolom, Australia, CMAG's mandate was further clarified. It was established that the Group's mandate is not confined only to situations where a democratically elected government has been overthrown, but also covers other circumstances where a member country is perceived to be in serious or persistent violation of the Harare Commonwealth principles. A series of steps were spelt out, including the application of the Secretary-General's good offices to encourage member countries to move towards full compliance with the Harare principles. At its May 2002 meeting in Kasane, Botswana, CMAG welcomed the expanded mandate of the Group and began to put it into operation.

At its meetings since the Coolom summit the Group has reviewed developments in the countries on its agenda – Fiji Islands, Pakistan, Solomon Islands and Zimbabwe. Pakistan and Zimbabwe are currently suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth.

In considering the situation in Pakistan,

CMAG has noted the conclusions and recommendations of the Commonwealth Observer Group present at the country's October 2002 elections. It has welcomed the progress made by Pakistan in the establishment of democratic institutions including the election of the National Assembly, the Senate and Provincial Assemblies, and in the formation of democratic governments at the national and provincial levels. CMAG has been encouraged by the continuing progress in the development and growth of democratic institutions. At the same time, it has registered concerns about the status of the Legal Framework Order in particular, and expressed the hope that the dialogue between the Government and the opposition parties on outstanding issues would be concluded successfully in the spirit of parliamentary practice and process. CMAG was to review Pakistan's suspension at its meeting in September 2003.

The Group has kept Zimbabwe on its agenda, though this issue has been dealt with primarily by the Commonwealth Chairpersons Committee of three leaders (the 'Troika') established by Heads of Government at Coolom to determine appropriate Commonwealth action after the Zimbabwe presidential election. In March 2002, the Troika suspended Zimbabwe from the councils of the Commonwealth, to be reviewed after one year. The Commonwealth Statement on Zimbabwe of 16 March 2003 stated that the broad Commonwealth view was that the suspension remain in place pending consideration by Heads of Government at their summit in December 2003 in Abuja.

Above:

Loading ballot boxes to be counted in Pakistan

Opposite (top):

A CMAG press conference in November 2002: (left to right) Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Samoa, Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon, Lt-Gen Mompoti Merafhe, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation of Botswana (Chairperson) and M Morshed Khan, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh

Opposite (bottom):

Making her voice count: a woman casts her vote in Sierra Leone



Fiji Islands was readmitted to the councils of the Commonwealth in December 2001 after the Fiji General Election, but CMAG has retained Fiji on its agenda because of the issues arising from the court case relating to the constitutionality of the formation of the Government. The Group agreed to continue to monitor the situation in Fiji Islands.

CMAG has also continued to monitor the situation in Solomon Islands, in the context of promoting stability in and international assistance to Solomon Islands.

CMAG's membership is approved by Heads of Government for a two-year term, renewable for a further two years. At Coolom, Commonwealth leaders agreed that a CMAG member can be retained for a third term if this is deemed desirable to preserve continuity, institutional knowledge or to provide linkages with relevant international organisations. Under the new procedures, the Group is also authorised to solicit, where appropriate, the intervention of the CHOGM Chairperson-in-Office, whose ministerial representative is invited to join CMAG.

CMAG currently consists of the Foreign Ministers of eight member countries: Botswana (Chairperson), Australia (Vice-Chairperson), The Bahamas, Bangladesh, Malta, India, Nigeria and Samoa.

Election observation and democratic assistance

The observation of elections and the provision of technical assistance and training are two key ways in which the Commonwealth Secretariat works to strengthen democracy – and democratic institutions in particular – in member countries.

Between July 2001 and June 2003 the Secretary-General sent Commonwealth Observer Groups to observe elections in nine countries: Fiji Islands, The Gambia, Solomon Islands, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Lesotho, Pakistan, Kenya and Nigeria. Smaller scale Commonwealth Expert Teams were present in two others: Cameroon and Zanzibar, United Republic of Tanzania. The Observer Groups were asked to report on the credibility of the electoral process, whether the conditions existed for a free expression of will by the electors and if the election results reflected the wishes of the people. Each Group's report also contained practical recommendations to help improve election arrangements for the future. Copies of the Groups' reports are available to the public from the Secretariat's Political Affairs Division and the most recent are posted on the Secretariat's website.

At the request of member governments, the Secretariat also provides technical assistance to strengthen democracy. Thirteen experts were sent to six countries in the period June 2002 to June 2003 alone. Some visits are relatively short – for instance, a media expert may visit for a fortnight to help ensure that in the pre-election period the contesting parties all get their fair share of impartial media coverage. A voter registration expert may advise an election body for a week on best practice in the use of Voter ID cards. Other assignments are much longer: one Commonwealth expert provided election management advice to a Commonwealth election management body for a full 18 months leading up to an election. This tailored provision of experts is a growing area of work and the Secretariat foresees even greater use

of this facility by member countries in the future.

Democracy workshops and publications

The Commonwealth promotes good democratic practice and works to strengthen democratic values and culture through the organisation of workshops, seminars and conferences and the production and circulation of publications. In the two years under review, workshops were held on money and democratic politics, voter registration and electoral systems, and the role of young people in the democratic process, under the banner 'Claiming the Future'. The reports of these and other workshops in the Secretariat's Deepening Democracy series are available from the Political Affairs Division. The Secretariat also publishes occasional papers from these meetings; the first – *Political Financing in the Commonwealth* – was published in 2002.

