



Commonwealth Secretariat

Briefing Note – Democracy

The challenge

The central features of a democracy include government based on majority rule and the consent of the governed, the existence of open and credible elections as well as the protection of minorities and respect for basic human rights.

Democracy presupposes equality before the law, due process and political pluralism. The challenge for Commonwealth member countries and the Commonwealth at large is to realise these principles and practices – as set out in statements on the Commonwealth's fundamental political values.

The Commonwealth strategy

To build stronger democratic processes across the Commonwealth on political issues.

Key result:

- Adherence to democratic principles and democratic processes is more evident among Commonwealth countries.
- Democratic processes and institutions are strengthened, including the role of the media and civil society.
- Women, youth and other vulnerable groups and civil society organisations participate more effectively and frequently in decision-making institutions and processes.

Key principles and practices

Harare Declaration:

Affirmed the 'individual's inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which he or she lives' and pledges to work further on 'democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government.'

Millbrook Commonwealth Action Plan:

The Secretariat should enhance its capacity to provide advice, training and other forms of technical assistance to governments in promoting the Commonwealth's fundamental political values, including:

- Assistance in creating and building the capacity of requisite institutions;
- Assistance in constitutional and legal matters, including selecting models and initiating programmes of democratisation;

- Assistance in the electoral field, including the establishment or strengthening of independent electoral machinery, civic and voter education, the preparation of codes of conduct, and assistance with voter registration;
- Observation of elections, including by-elections or local elections where appropriate, at the request of the member governments concerned;
- Strengthening the rule of law and promoting the independence of the judiciary through the promotion of exchanges and training;
- Support for good governance, particularly in the area of public service reform;
- Other activities, in collaboration with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and other bodies, to strengthen the democratic culture and effective parliamentary practices.

The practical response

The Commonwealth Secretariat works to improve democratic arrangements through the observation of elections and the provision of technical assistance and training:

- Since the beginning of 2006 (to March 2009) the Secretariat has deployed 19 Commonwealth Observer Groups (COGs) and Expert Teams (CETs);
- Technical assistance programmes;
- Institutional strengthening programmes;
- Through the organisation of workshops, seminars and conferences and the production and circulation of publications we work to promote best practice;
- Government and opposition workshops;
- Support for Election Commissions;
- Publications;
- The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, a group of eight Foreign Ministers, can take action against countries which are in 'serious or persistent violation' of the Commonwealth's democratic principles.

Ministerial meetings, election activities or other highlights

Commonwealth Observer Groups and Expert Teams

The Commonwealth has undertaken 19 COGs and CETs since the beginning of 2006. These are: Antigua & Barbuda (2009); Ghana, Bangladesh, Maldives, Swaziland, Belize and Sierra Leone (2008), Kenya, Sierra Leone, PNG, Nigeria, Lesotho (2007), Zambia, The Gambia, Guyana, Seychelles, Fiji Islands, Solomon Islands, Uganda (2006).

Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on the Harare Declaration (CMAG) meetings

There have been 12 CMAG meetings between 2004 and 2009. The most recent CMAG meeting was held in New York on 26 September 2009. Since 2004, the meetings have addressed issues in relation to the suspension of democracy in Fiji and concerning events in Pakistan.

Other highlights

A key focus of our work for 2009 and onwards will be a comprehensive programme of support for Election Commissions across the Commonwealth. This programme will promote good practices, offer practical assistance to commissions, facilitate peer

exchanges and promote the role of independent election commissions as integral institutions in the democratic process.

Other Commonwealth players and their works

Commonwealth Local Government Forum (CLGF)

The Commonwealth Local Government Forum works to promote and strengthen effective democratic local government throughout the Commonwealth and to facilitate the exchange of good practice in local government structures and services.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's mission is to promote the advancement of parliamentary democracy by enhancing knowledge and understanding of democratic governance. It seeks to build an informed parliamentary community and to further co-operation among parliaments and legislatures.

Relations with other bodies involved in the sector

The Commonwealth's main partners include: African Union, Asian Network for Free Elections, European Commission, Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, IFES, International IDEA, ERIS, NDI, Pacific Island forum, UN and multilateral and regional organisations and institutions, such as FAO, OECD, EC, ACP, OIF, as well as national governments and their respective agencies, such as CIDA, DFID, AusAid, and NZAid.