

Equatorial Guinea Uses Satellite Faxes During Vote Count Technology, Transparency Can Go Hand-in-Hand

by Pamela Reeves

An election has become much more than dropping ballots into sealed boxes, counting them, and announcing a winner. In the 1990s, as an increasing number of developing countries follow a path toward electoral democracy, technology is changing the way the democratic process looks. In Equatorial Guinea this year, technology and democracy were featured hand-in-hand during the first multiparty presidential election in that country's history.

Did the "high tech" equipment put in place by the Equatorial Guinean government further the cause of electoral democracy? Did it even help the process?

TRANSITION TO ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

Equatorial Guinea has suffered a long history of colonialism and dictatorship. After gaining power during a military coup in 1979, President Teodoro Obiang has chosen to pursue electoral democracy as part of the modernization process. Political parties were legalized in 1992,

multiparty legislative elections were held in 1993, and the first-ever multiparty municipal elections were held in September 1995. With these apparent gains in the political sphere, the country has also discovered the potential key to economic prosperity: oil. By all accounts, Equatorial Guinea is poised to leave behind its "developing" status and enter the privileged circle of countries considered to be "stable democracies." The government has chosen its mechanism for change and has the resources to support it.

In September 1995, the country's first multiparty municipal elections did not bear out the promise of this new direction. Elections were held for Mayor and Councils of the twenty-seven municipalities of Equatorial Guinea, which comprises Bioko Island (where Malabo, the country's capital, is located) and Riomuni, the mainland portion. Opposition parties claim that immediately after the September 17 election, a parallel count showed that opposition parties won 20 municipalities. The government's counting and

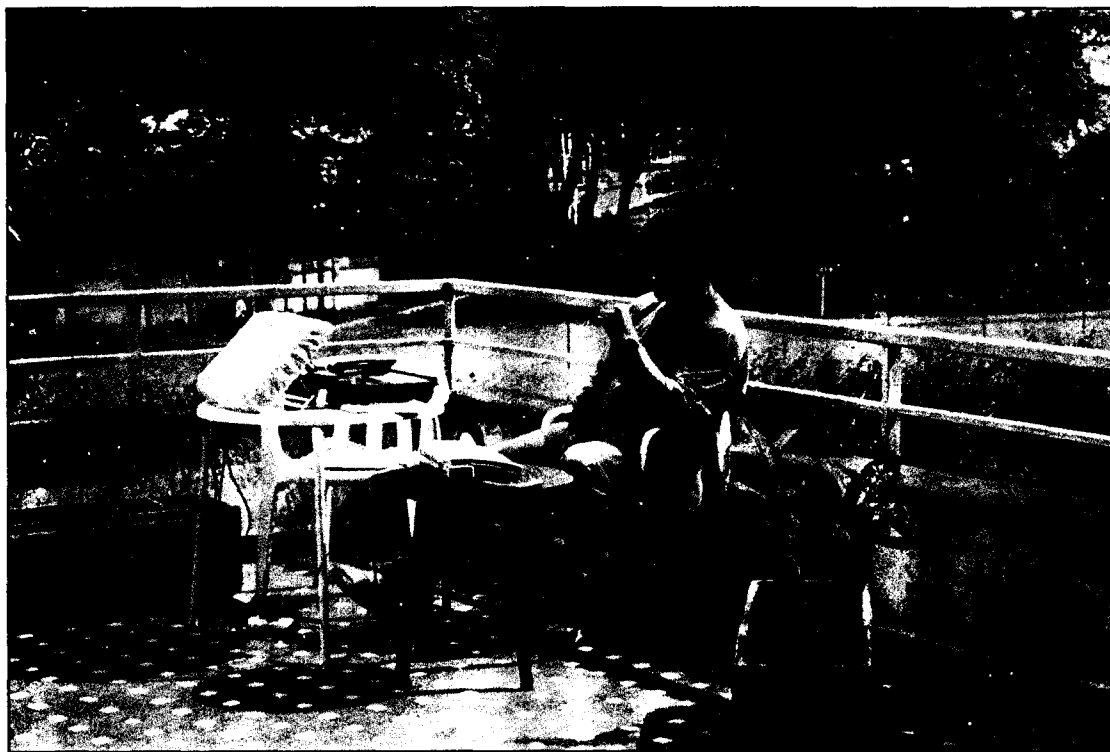
tabulation took ten days, and gave the opposition only nine municipalities. Opposition parties felt the government had "stolen" their rightful gains by manipulating the results.

HIGH-TECH SOLUTIONS

In response to the opposition's demand for justice and clearly serious in its intent to guarantee the transparency of the vote transmission, the Government of Equatorial Guinea spent a reported US\$750,000 to hire a reputable British company to supply fax machines and satellite link-ups manned by individual technical experts in each of the 18 district headquarters on the mainland and Bioko.

The technicians' job was to fax to Malabo the result forms (*actas*) as they were brought into the district headquarters from individual polling stations. As a backup measure, the president of each polling station was to bring in the original *acta*, ballots, and all other documentation, to be carried to Malabo for a final verification of the vote count.

In Malabo, there were five fax machines standing by to receive the *actas* as they were sent from all over the country. The results center also had a copy machine where the technicians would make two copies of the original, faxed *acta*: one for the Electoral Commission to tabulate in order to announce district results on a rolling basis; and one for the Commission to post for easy access by international observers and the media. On paper, this high-tech solution addressed all of the concerns surrounding the transparency of vote transmission and tabulation. But high tech does not mean foolproof.



The government used fax machines and satellite link-ups to forward election results from 18 district headquarters.

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has to be prioritized. Necessities that are carried include folding tables for voting screens and issuing staff, folding chairs, cardboard tabletop voting screens, ballot boxes, a box containing the certified list of voters, ballot papers, stationery, and signs. Party agents are allowed to follow a mobile polling team, but cannot travel in the same vehicle. Otherwise they operate under the same rules as at any other polling place.

The delivery of materials to static booths and mobile polling teams is by truck if practical or by light plane. On the day after the election, material is again picked up in the same way and transported to the DRO's Office.

POLLING OFFICIALS

In many areas of Australia's outback, polling staff have worked for many elections with the AEC, but in other areas it is often difficult to find suitable staff. Staff training is usually done in small groups and may involve people driving hundreds of kilometers to attend a training session. The Training Unit of the AEC has developed a package that includes an instruction manual, workbook, and video which can be sent to staff who are unable

to attend training sessions in these areas.

CONCLUSION

Election administration in the outback is now a highly streamlined, though still challenging, process. During the March 1996 federal election, hundreds of thousands of votes were cast in remote areas, but the results were nevertheless known in all the outback seats within a few hours of the closing of the polls, as was the case in urban areas. The ballot papers taken on remote mobile polling runs were tallied at a static booth at the end of the run or returned by air to a main town in time to count when voting finished. Counting also took place at static booths in remote areas. Results from the static booths and the mobile runs counted at static booths were then rung through to the Divisional Returning Officers in the major towns, who entered results into a computer system linked directly to the National Tally Room in Canberra. ☐

Barbara Miller is Assistant Director of Research and International Services at the Australian Electoral Commission. She has lived and worked in the Australian outback for most of the last twenty years.

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and handed it to the "reader," who read it ("Candidate X, Name, One Vote!") in a loud, clear voice, holding it so observers could see it was read accurately. Tally sheets for each candidate, each with room for 100 votes, had been placed on the wall. As each vote was read, it was repeated and marked on the appropriate tally sheet by the clerk responsible for that tally sheet. It was then passed to another student, who passed it to the clerk responsible for placing it in the corresponding candidate's pile. When a clerk indicated a tally sheet was full, the loose ballots in that candidate's pile were banded and another tally sheet was taped over the full one. This process took just over 90 minutes for approximately 1,400 presidential votes. Only six votes were invalidated, most because the voter had voted with their "chop," a personal seal commonly used in Asia, rather than the stamp provided in each voting booth. (Independent candidate Lin Yang-Kang won by 30 votes at that polling place.) The National Assembly ballots were then read and recorded in a

similar process. When the first ballot out of the National Assembly box was a presidential one, the presidential vote totals were adjusted before proceeding.

All poll workers, except the administrators, were paid at the polling place. The administrators were paid, instead, at the district office once all their forms and materials were verified. Vote tallies were then taken to the data entry room at the district office; once entered, a printout was compared to the original before the votes were transmitted to the municipal level. After reaching the municipal level, votes were retrieved by the Central Election Commission computer every three minutes and added to the running totals, which were displayed for the media, parties, and observers at Taipei's Physical Education University arena. ☐

Ray Kennedy is Director of Information Resources at the International Foundation for Election Systems. With Judy Fernald (IFES Board of Directors) and Terry Holcomb (IFES Consultant), Mr. Kennedy observed the 1996 presidential and National Assembly elections in the Republic of China.

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LESSONS LEARNED IN TECHNOLOGY

Ideally, the technology would function as follows: the portable telephone/fax machine transmitted via satellite to an earth station in Canada, then to a public telephone network on the mainland, then to a microwave link to Malabo, and finally through a local telephone network to the receiving portable telephone/fax machine. Every call went through this process, even a call made from a neighboring town. On February 23, however, the earth station in Canada went down, reducing the chances of any call being received to 30 percent, slowing the process considerably. To lessen the burden on the receiving fax machines in Malabo, a decision was taken to remove the technology from those areas where results could be hand carried to the Electoral Commission headquarters. This would normally make good sense; in this case, however, ballot boxes went astray and results were inexplicably delayed leading to precisely the questions the Electoral Commission was hoping to avoid by using the high-tech system.

On February 28, the fax machines were turned off and packed away, with approximately 75 percent of the votes reported. The Electoral Commission stopped posting provisional results, explaining that they would wait for results from those areas where the fax technology had broken down. It was not until March 11, fifteen days after the vote took place, that final results were released. With the expensive, high-tech "solution," election results took longer to be released than they had in the 1995 municipal elections, before the introduction of the satellite phone and fax into Equatorial Guinean election administration. Technology can be a boon in the electoral process when it is properly used and understood. But technology cannot be used in a vacuum; it must be accompanied by true political will. With their experience now in the areas of both democracy and technology, the Equatorial Guineans should be in an ideal position to make their next elections (legislative elections scheduled for 1998) free, fair, transparent, and easy. ☐

Pamela Reeves is IFES Program Officer for Africa and the Near East. She has managed election assistance and observation missions in Africa and throughout Central America, and coordinated the IFES observation in Equatorial Guinea.