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Professor gets chance of a lifetime in South Africa

By David Thorn
Oregon Daily Emerald

Last April, millions of black South Africans, long excluded from the political process in their home country, voted for the very first time.

Ibrahim Gassama was there to watch.

Gassama, assistant professor of law at the University, was coordinator of the largest American non-governmental effort to send election observers to South Africa. He helped direct the recruitment, training and deployment of about 300 such observers from the United States.

The government of South Africa requested observers from around the world to view the three-day election (four days in some areas). Never before had all South Africans, regardless of race, been allowed to participate.

"The key obligation, as the South African authorities saw it," Gassama said, "was they wanted the world community to help them certify that the election was free and fair. That was the critical point. It needed to meet ... the approval of the South African people to be seen as legitimate."

"Because apartheid had become such a global issue, they wanted the world community to see that it was free and fair, and as such, international observers were critical to the process."

Gassama said there were approximately 2,500 non-governmental observers from around the world that watched the election. Like him, many of them must have been surprised when the expectations of widespread violence during the elections turned out to be false.

"It was amazing, it was almost a miraculous event,"

Gassama said. "As everybody who paid attention at the time realized, there was a considerable amount of violence before the election; a few weeks before the election people were predicting civil war in the country."

"But then the election happened," Gassama said that during the election, there were virtually no violent incidents, "except for a brief period of bombings that took place by members of the Afrikaner resistance movement, who carried out a spree of bombings. They were quickly arrested — most of them were arrested — so the bombing stopped. After that, the violence died out."

Once the specter of violence began to recede, South African authorities could turn their full attention to the business of con-

'...her eyes locked in to mine, holding her card, and telling me she had come to vote for the Famous One. That's how many of them referred to Mandela in their language.'

— Ibrahim Gassama,
assistant professor, School of Law

ducting the elections. But that was not exactly a smooth process.

"The election itself was an administrative nightmare. It was a total screw-up. In fact, that's how it was described."

"Some people blamed the electoral commission and said the election was a success in spite of them. My view was, the task they were asked to perform was an impossible task."

A variety of factors contributed to the difficulty of carrying out the elections. Balloting materials arrived at polling stations late, and one of the major parties agreed to join the election only after the materials were printed, so stickers for that party had to be added to every single ballot.

"Clearly, there was enormous confusion during the election. Most of these people, you must remember, have never voted before. What we observed in the election was that there was a high rate of illiteracy — over 60 percent of black South Africans ... some of them did not even know how to hold a pencil to mark their ballot," Gassama said.

To compensate for this illiteracy, the ballots contained symbols for each party, accompanied by photographs of each party's leader.

"The counting (of the ballots) was a nightmare, too. It was a disaster. Counting was supposed to occur over a three-day period, but took over a week and they still could not get all the votes counted."

"And then," Gassama said, "an amazing thing began to happen. The parties began to meet, and they compromised politically. To cut a long story short, everybody left satisfied. Politically, everybody was satisfied."

"Nobody questioned the electoral results, even though people questioned the manner in which it was achieved, in which it was calculated. There were all sorts of suspicions as to that, but the final result was ... in the exact wording of the electoral commission, (considered) to be 'sufficiently free and fair.' And the international observers con-

curred, that it was substantially free and fair, and all the political parties accepted it, even though it was an overwhelming victory for the ANC."

ANC stands for the African National Congress, a political party which had been long outlawed in South Africa for advocating the end of apartheid, but which was recently legalized.

Its leader is Nelson Mandela, who was finally freed in 1990 after spending 27 years locked up as a political prisoner.

"Homage must be paid to Mandela," Gassama said. "To the leaders of South Africa, but especially to Mandela's ability to compromise and to inspire people. The elections themselves were conducted under nightmarish conditions, the counting was done in a manner that could charitably be considered to be virtually incompetent, inept."

"But still, at the end of the day, the people of South Africa and their leaders were able to find the capacity to compromise, and today they have a government of national unity, which is perhaps one of the few governments, if not the only one in the world, that has all the major conflicting parties together, working together, and so far, it's working."

Included with the ANC in the new government are the National Party, composed overwhelmingly of white voters, and the Inkatha Freedom Party, which has its base of support among the Zulu people of eastern South Africa.

"The ANC is the dominant party, with less than two-thirds of the votes, but the National Party, the Afrikaner Party, which dominated South Africa from 1948 to now, is a junior partner in this government of national unity and it has accepted it."

"The Inkatha Freedom Party, which has been the sworn enemy of the ANC all these years, is another junior party in the government and it has accepted its role."

"Up to now, I mean, fingers are still crossed — no one can bet on anything that will happen a year

from now. But on a continent that is full of disasters and a lack of political compromise, I think South Africa has demonstrated that it is possible for even bitter enemies to come together and work out and accept a solution for everybody."

Gassama traveled throughout South Africa as coordinator of the American observers, and accumulated many memories along the way.

"Two images stand out with me," Gassama said. "One is the long line of people snaking around this compound, standing patiently, sitting patiently, waiting, cooking their food, waiting from early in the morning to late at night, till finally all the foreign observers gave up and had to go home."

"I remember some of us trying to explain to these people, trying to get our South African guides to explain to them, that there was no way they were going to vote today. 'It's too late. There are not enough supplies.'"

"But the people said, 'No, we are not going home. We are going to vote.' And these were elderly people I'm talking about — this was the first day of the election that was reserved for the elderly and the disabled. And that was the day of the biggest mismanagement, the biggest screw-up. Total disaster. These people were patient."

"These people were so determined to vote, to cast their vote. Something that in America, no American would understand. No one would put up with that in this country to vote. To wait for 24 hours or more, and these people came from miles, some of them were even bussed in."

Gassama remembered what he was thinking as he left one polling station, late at night, in a rural section of northwestern South Africa.

"Seeing these people as they lit their fires, waiting, and wondering what was going to happen to them that first night — not being sure. Given the way South Africa was, someone could have come there late at night and machine-gunned them to death."

"It never happened and it turned out there was much less violence. But I'm talking about the frame of mind I was in the first day of the election. You expected violence and death. And then you see these people unprotected, snaking around the rural areas, sitting there patiently."

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