

A personal account of South Africa's 4th Democratic Election Johannesburg



Elections in the New South Africa are wondrous affairs. In spite of the naysayers, the doom and gloomists, elections in South Africa never cease to amaze the political pundit (foreign and local), the casual observer, the indifferent bystander and the ordinary South African voter.

I cast my vote, together with my wife Ann, in Ward 73, Nelson Mandela's ward, at the Killarney Sports Club, Houghton. Peacefully.

Mandela, our iconic leader and the first democratically elected president of South Africa had voted earlier, in what turned out to be a cold autumn morning.

The chill in the air did not stop, as one eTV political commentator put it, a Hollywood-style red carpet welcome for the revered elder statesman. ANC supporters were there in their droves. The ANC tents, posters and banners belied the fact that this ward was a traditional opposition stronghold, for it lies in the wealthy Johannesburg Northern suburbs.

Nor did the chill stop the millions of rural voters who lined up as they did in that miracle of an election in 1994, from 4am in the morning. The media reported that over 90 per cent of the voting booths had opened on time at 7am, to start the day's affairs.

Whether one took reports from Monument Park in the nation's capital Pretoria (where the local Mugg & Bean restaurant franchise served free coffee to voters), from St. Paul's Church, Rondebosch, Cape Town (where Helen Zille voted with her husband and sons in reportedly her first public outing in an age) or Ntholwane School in Nkandla in the rolling hills of Kwazulu-Natal (where Jacob Zuma, president-in-waiting voted) the story was the same: the Independent Electoral Commission had done a fine job in organizing this, the fourth election.

The IEC officials were on hand to assist, guide and advise voters. Told that 60-year-olds could move to the front of the line, my good friend and founder of Lawyers for Human Rights in South Africa Brian Currin muttered darkly that he was not 60 and would not move. He waited in line for another one-and-a-half hours to vote.

My line in Houghton was no shorter, with voters of all races, cultures and creeds standing patiently to cast their vote for both national and provincial candidates.

Having decided my vote from what seemed to be a cast of thousands on the ballot papers (there were 26 parties in the election), I made my way later that day to an

Energy Awards dinner in Sandton. One of my guests at the table was a colleague and friend from Zimbabwe, Victor Utedzi, who told me that he had listened with some emotion to the news reports during the course of the day and could not help but reflect on the hardship of his own people and the elections he had experienced not so long ago, when hundreds were injured or killed in attempting to vote. He said ours was a wonderful story and it should be treasured.

By the time I came home from the ceremony, the first results had come in from a small town in the Northern Cape, a poor and thinly-populated province.

It was widely anticipated that the first results would emanate from Robben Island, Nelson Mandela's home for a large part of his 27 years in imprisonment and symbolic landmark of the struggle for democracy in South Africa. What was clear was that there had been a massive voter turnout in polling booths across the country. Once again South Africans had respected their right to vote, had done so in droves, and by-and-large had a happy time doing so.

Naturally, there were reports of stuffed ballot boxes, of intimidation, a shooting and even a killing - but I have not dwelled upon these incidents. Instead, for the vast majority of the 23 million voters who turned out on a public holiday to celebrate a robust democracy, the day passed peacefully, and without incident.

I have chosen to paint a kind picture of this day, to bask in the history of the moment. Besides *Cry the Beloved Country*, for which he was world-renowned, the South African author Alan Paton penned another novel *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*. I reflected on this title, because the land is indeed so.