

Ah! Mandela— A New South Africa

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the television played all waking hours, serving as our information source of the activity in the rest of the country, a way to keep in touch.

Here in the Western Cape, by 11am on April 27, it poured rain. To see 600 to 700 people standing patiently in the pouring rain was really quite moving. At the end of that day, when we finally switched off the fax machine and the duplicators, we were exhausted but elated as it had been a great day in our lives and a great day for the Centre.

Ours wasn't the only Centre that contributed to this election as Antony Osler from the Poplar Grove Zen Centre was controlling the monitoring operation in Kimberley, in the Northern Cape. Other sangha members helped out in other parts of the country.

Finally we have all stood together with the same goal, the same objective—people simply wanting peace and happiness. The elections are done, and the effect in our country and the rest of the world will continue for years to come. With the experience of the two day election, South Africa can now go forward, confident in claiming its rightful place in the world.

“KWAN SEUM BOSAL”



The months leading up to election week saw the media crammed with propaganda and predictions, bombarding the populace with a plethora of empty speculation about “whom did what to whom in the past” as well as “what they will do when...” in the future.

As members of the Dharma Centre, we needed to be involved in this process of change but the question was just how? Before too long the Western Cape Provincial Council of Churches, based in Cape Town, called upon church leaders of all denominations to adopt a leading role during the preparatory period as well as in the running of the elections.

A peace project was launched by the Mayor of Cape Town with Bishop Desmond Tutu delivering the opening address and prayer and myself concluding the event with a Buddhist prayer. In conversation with Bishop Tutu after the meeting, he took my hands in his and said, “You know, you Buddhists are always so calm and peaceful. I have the greatest love and admiration for his Holiness the Dalai Lama and I am delighted that we, as religious leaders, can finally join hands for peace.” My heart was truly filled with joy! Bishop Tutu, a warm, humble, great man.

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was founded to oversee and administer the elections. The Dharma Centre was invited to be part of this body and I served as the District Monitor, monitoring the election process in the district where the Dharma Centre is situated. I was soon to be known as “our red-headed Buddhist sister.”

Our job as District Monitors was to have our teams trained by the IEC and canvas our people. I was blessed with a team balanced by race, gender and religion. Each and every member committed to peace and with one common goal in mind: Everyone wants change.

The question of a Buddhist group leader, with meetings surrounded by statues, Buddhist pictures and having to take off one's shoes, needed to be addressed. As I pondered a way to approach the team with regard to this issue, Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching came to my rescue: “DON'T MAKE ANYTHING!” Truly simple. Recognizing and sympathizing with members feeling threatened was our first step toward healing the wounds of our country. Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jew, Black, White, Coloured and Indian—NO PROBLEM! Members of our team could often be heard saying “Man, don't make anything, just do it!”

Our weekly training sessions at the Dharma Centre were awaited with joy and excitement. We planned and plotted with Rodney ever at hand giving moral and gastronomic support. Soon our team became known as the hottest team around.

No amount of training could have possibly prepared us for the chaos and long hours of work prior to and during election days. Nobody truly knew how many people would come to cast their vote and no words could adequately convey the atmosphere of patience, dignity, joy, smiling faces and helping hands that prevailed at voting stations, even in the pouring rain.

Voter education prior to the elections was a mammoth task and executed more effectively in some areas than in others. At one voting station a lady was found to have colored in all the blank boxes intended for marking the one party of her choice. She stopped only when she reached the box next to Mr. Mandela's picture. Her mission accomplished, but a spoilt paper and a lost vote.

One elderly gentleman, shaking, hardly able to hold the pencil in his hand, was assisted by two voting officials. After five minutes of ethical and legal coaxing, one official, realizing that "old uncle" did not know whom to vote for, was heard to say "Uncle, just vote for the one with the nicest face."

Having cast their vote (for most their very first vote), some became quiet, others had tear-filled eyes, some literally ran out of the voting arena. One lady, quite positively bursting with joy, exclaimed at the top of her voice "dit was lekker!" (Afrikaans for "that was great").

Observing and monitoring the electoral process included securing a restricted entry, high security perimeter surrounding voting stations and counting stations. We sometimes had to negotiate and mediate in conflict situations between political parties. In one case we had a brush with the chairperson of the local taxi association, a very powerful body in South Africa. Due to a lack of communication, planning and a simple oversight, we omitted negotiating the relocation of a taxi stand falling within a restricted area. Realizing the potential security risks at a major counting station, we called a meeting with the chairperson of the taxi association, the police commander and the chief of traffic. The taxi chairperson, having adopted an aggressive stance, informed me that I, together with the traffic officials, were at fault. Explaining in very graphic language that Saturday was the busiest day of business, he said "we cannot move 30 taxis at this late time." His powerful verbal onslaught left me momen-

tarily stunned, then "How may we help you, sir?" came to my rescue, and a potentially explosive situation was defused. The taxi chairperson responded without hesitation, "No, lady, how can we help *you*?" The chief of traffic and police commissioner approached me at an opportune time and asked, "how did you do that, who are you and where do you come from?"

On the day following the last day of voting, a group of foreign journalists were heard to say, "We are pulling out, there is no action here." The peace and calm prevailing in our country immediately before, during and after the elections is surely unprecedented in an event of such importance—it can be done!

Here at the Dharma Centre, political parties sat around a table, no shoes, talking, posturing and eventually softening around the edges, agreeing that when the 1994 election dust finally settles on our beautiful village

and country, we all want to live together in harmony and acceptance of change, embracing peace.

Admittedly, it will be some time before the dust does settle, before the wrongs of the past are forgiven and the wounds are healed. This is the birth of a new country. Building houses, educating our youth, aiding our poor, are all part of our new job in this, the new South Africa. Zen Master Seung Sahn always says "only try, try, try for 10,000

years, then anything is possible."

This was a truly life-changing experience, working with people exiled from their country for many years, now returning home to the prospect of freedom and peace.

In the years prior to the referendum and elections, when visiting abroad, people repeatedly responded with tension upon hearing that we came from South Africa. They often reacted with slight anger and judgement, saying "How can you live there?" Things have changed. During a visit to Korea in May, many people asked us where we came from. Our reply, "Nam Aphrica" (South Africa). Their response, "Ah... Mandela!"

Viva South Africa, viva the great people of our land! ☉



Heila and her team

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