



Surviving crazy insects and crooked human beings



By Shireen Badat

DATE: 27 April, 7.30am, outside a voting station in Victoria West. Mission: to observe voting in the rural Northern Cape and find out for *Democracy in Action* whether life in rural South Africa is changing.

Voting officials have decided to allow 10 voters into the hall at a time. By coincidence a group of 20 voters arrive. The first 10 are

white, the second 10 are black. Is this some sort of sign?

The police outside are very friendly and greet all voters by name. The queue trickles off. Now there are only two white people standing in line. A black man in overalls joins the queue, doffs his cap politely and greets those in front of him, "Môre, baas Piet, baas Koos."

Two more white men join the queue and the man in overalls politely steps back to allow them to pass him. This continues until I decide to bring the situation to a nearby policeman's attention. The nice policeman then explains to the man in overalls that on this day everyone is equal and that he needn't give way to his superiors.

We move on to the voting station in the local coloured township. A long winding queue stretches over the dusty hills. There are hundreds of people in the queue, but they're all very quiet. Inside the voting station people sit on chairs waiting to be helped (with anxious expressions on their faces).

A local official says there is a high level of illiteracy in the area and not much voter education has taken place, so most people have to be assisted with voting. However, the entire community has turned out to vote because people think they will go to jail if they don't.

The night before in the local pub, disgruntled party agents tell us strange things are happening at a voting station on a local farm. Locals give us directions to the farm and tell us it is not far from the town.

Over an hour later, after being bumped and tossed around on the dusty gravel road and attacked by giant, kamikaze locusts, we arrive at the farm. The presiding officer is a local farmer. He says things are going slowly. He has told his workers to come and vote the next day, but if things get too boring he'll just whistle and his workers will come running.

The farmer says he has been running elections in this area all his life and he can't understand why the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) is creating such a fuss about this election. He says the coloured farm workers have voted in tricameral elections before and all they did then was point out who they wanted to vote for and he would

make the cross for them. He can't understand all this "secrecy business".

We head for the next voting station along another dusty road. A sign outside the little town welcomes all visitors. Everything seems to be going smoothly at the warehouse which houses the voting station. The presiding officer says most residents have voted already. He knows all the locals and says that only 30 more people have to vote.

On our way out of the town we stop at a picturesque little hotel to quench our thirst. The hotel keeper says only residents are allowed inside. If we want anything to drink we have to use the door around the corner.

On the way back to our hotel we give a stranded driver a lift. He turns out to be one of the few coloured organisers for the ANC in the area. He teaches at the local school and is also a lay preacher in the Apostolic Church. However, because of his involvement in the ANC, the church has suspended him from preaching. They will reconsider his suspension after the elections.

The following day our journey takes us 250km north to the next town. Along the way we encounter giant, cannibal crickets. Is this another sign?

Outside the voting station we come across more disgruntled local observers and party agents. They are not happy about the way things are being run inside. The presiding officer says, however, that things inside are going very smoothly. The only problem is the party agents who keep on questioning him.

The team splits up to talk to other officials in the station. One of the local IEC officials, obviously put out by this intrusion, points to my Xhosa-speaking colleague and tells the presiding officer that these "kaffirs" have been speaking too long in the voting station.

We travel further north until we reach the Orange River. The entrance to the little coloured community is festooned with political posters and banners. The tiny coloured and African communities are separated by a church which serves as the voting station. Inside the church we are surprised by the obvious unity between the two communities.

At the voting station in the white part of town the National Party voting agent says this election has cost us all a lot of money, but at least now it's over and done with and life can go back to normal.

About 3 000km later I was still trying to work out what was normal in the rural Northern Cape. Were the paternalistic attitudes we saw a sincere attempt to overcome problems of bad education and the other ills of apartheid, or were they racism in disguise? ■