

*“We need time to retrieve our hacks from the funny farm and smooth the nervous tics of those who survived the elections stranglehold ...”*

## ‘Just another little hitch’

**MARK VAN DER VELDEN** explains how South Africa’s national news agency salvaged the election results swallowed up by the IEC.

**L**IKE the elections, it took our constitutional negotiators a long time, but they did get at least one thing right — we have five years’ grace before the next election.

Can we believe them? Well, let’s see. Or rather, one nightmare at a time, please, and could you throw in a substantially free and fair interval as well? We need time to retrieve our hacks from the funny farm and smooth the nervous tics of those who survived the elections stranglehold that inaugurated the “new” South Africa.

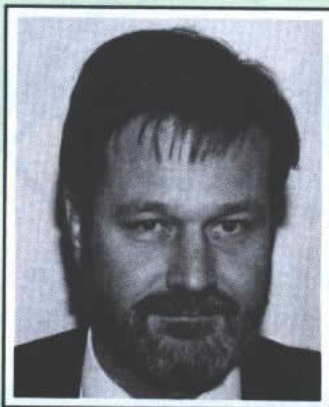
The moans? Well, under-staffed, under-funded and under-you name it, Sapa plunged down the waterfall with all the rest and, honestly, all the mistakes we made, even the little ones, were somebody else’s fault. You name the *blapsie*, and we have an excuse for it. Along with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and attendant politicians we’ve learnt a little more about ducking and diving ourselves.

The IEC chief, Judge Kriegler, warned us his team had up to 10 days to decide on the election outcome after polls closed, but was confident he did not expect it to take long at all.

We may have hoped he was right, at the time, but the elections, and particularly the counting, went on, and on, and on ... night and day. Trapped in a scrambled mess of public information vacuums, reliably sourced but unconfirmed reports of total chaos at the IEC’s Kruis Street headquarters, and suspiciously bland assurances from officials that “all’s well, just another little hitch”, we writhed in agony.

As a national news agency, one of our prime tasks in serving subscribers was to get — and onpass within seconds — reliable updates on the counting process, as well as the final result and its breakdown.

The tidal wave facing us included a possible total of nearly 23 million unregistered voters, broken down into nine provinces, a national assembly (including a



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provincial breakdown), and a shifting-sands list of candidates running into the thousands. Many of these had names relatively unknown, unpronounceable and unspellable to that body of editors (and journalists) described by Nelson Mandela as “white, middle-aged and middle-class” and with no life experience of the (black) majority in South Africa.

Weeks before, as part of the process of preparing so much, based on so little real pre-election information — and fully suspecting it would all fall apart anyway — we probed the rapidly growing amoebic mass of the IEC for one tiny, concrete, confirmation that, yes, Sapa would have access to running election results. Lots of ifs and buts and “have you got the OK from—/ rather wait until a little later/ maybe next week/ when you can contact so-and-so who will definitely sort it out”.

The IEC’s insistence on running things independently of a “tainted” government system is understandable, but if it were not for the sprinkling of experienced Foreign Affairs, SA Communications Service and other professional officials we found seconded to Judge Kriegler’s team, we would have faced even greater problems. They knew what we wanted, forgave the nasty things said and written about them in the past, and networked successfully through

the IEC’s maze for Sapa when we were way past the 10-9-8- countdown.

Through these officials, and with the aid of a high-tech computer purchased literally from the boot of one car with a crumpled cheque and sweatily bundled into another, this time belonging to a vital and kindly computer boffin ensconced in the IEC’s bowels, we linked up with the IEC’s election results database. It was a distilled feed from the voluminous database, tailored to our requirements.

We had everything we possibly could have in place, but IEC unknowns dealing with undisclosed emergencies on their side tampered endlessly with the formats.

We got it together in the end, and it worked well, running like clockwork. That was until, as increasingly feared all along, Judge Kriegler’s numbers fell apart and his team holed up, virtually incommunicado, at Kruis Street while they looked things through again.

The IEC shut down all results announcements for about 26 hours, revamped its counting procedures, and stripped clean its distant multi-million rand media centre due to lack of international (and local) media interest. Our computer link-up was installed there, tucked in with all the official equipment, and was dutifully swept away, without our knowledge, to prevent it being pinched. We salvaged most of it from a locked back room later.

This meant that when the final results did come through, for all our preparations, we were reduced to an ordinary modem feed — thanks to our sleepless computer friend at the IEC — who pumped it down the telephone line to us, and onwards to subscribers.

Our moans and groans about the elections continue ... roll on 1999.

■ *Sapa Editor Mark van der Velden is a Rhodes journalism graduate.*