



NATIONAL CITIZENS' MOVEMENT FOR FREE ELECTIONS (NAMFREL)

Room 601, DMG Center, Domingo M. Guevara St.,
Barangay Mauway, Mandaluyong City 1550
Philippines

Telefax: +63 (2) 8470-4151
Wireless Landline: +63 (2) 8736-0969; 8788-3484
Telephone: +63 (2) 8451-1586
Mobile No.: +63 939.1102872; 977.2417080
E-Mail: namfrelsecretariat@namfrel.org.ph
Website: www.namfrel.org.ph

NAMFREL Report on Limited Observation of the Registration Process (January-March 2021)

Introduction

NAMFREL's limited observation of the Voter Registration process aimed to gather verified and concrete information on the conduct of registration at the local level, to be used by NAMFREL in crafting policy recommendations to further improve the different processes related to the 2022 National and Local Elections, more urgently the voter registration process. The activity was in line with NAMFREL's goal to help assist the Commission on Elections (Comelec) in getting as many Filipinos as possible to be registered, as well as to provide a third-party citizen oversight of the different electoral processes. The activity was done in coordination with local Comelec offices, and in accordance with health regulations in place.

Twenty (20) NAMFREL chapters from all over the country were pre-selected to participate in the observation. These chapters were chosen for regional representation, recent performance as indicator for likelihood of ability to carry out the task on short notice, and the chapters' already established relationship with their Comelec counterparts.

Each chapter was instructed to deploy one observer to observe the voter registration process at the main registration center in the provincial capital, for about one hour each day (in a week), originally for four consecutive weeks. The observers were guided by an observation form/questionnaire, in paper form, but a Google Form version was eventually provided to facilitate ease of submission of data to NAMFREL national headquarters. The questions on the form were based on Comelec's published guidelines for the resumption of registration (COMELEC Resolution No. 10674).

To further prepare the volunteers for the observation, an online briefing was held on December 22, 2020 to discuss each question in the observation form to ensure that everybody understood the information they needed to get.

NAMFREL Observation

The observation of voter registration centers was eventually carried out by eighteen NAMFREL chapters in the following areas:

Luzon:

Abra
Bataan
La Union
Pangasinan
Zambales
Rizal
Camarines Norte
Catanduanes

NCR:

Malabon
Mandaluyong
Muntinlupa

Visayas:

Guimaras
Negros Oriental

Mindanao:

Misamis Oriental
Zamboanga City
Zamboanga del Sur
Basilan
Lanao del Sur

The actual observation started on January 4, 2020 for most of the NAMFREL chapters involved. While the observation was originally planned to end after four weeks, NAMFREL decided to extend the activity until March 2020 to enable the chapters to observe and be able to submit all their filled-out forms, as the observers encountered challenges in the completion of their observation, more specifically their respective jobs, as well as the unpredictable lockdowns in their respective areas.

Critical information that were gleaned from the observation were:

- Health and safety protocols
- Physical characteristics of COMELEC offices / registration centers
- Number of registrants
- Total time spent by registrants inside the center

Some specific activities monitored in the registration center were entry procedures, registration proper, adherence to health and safety guidelines, and the registration environment.

Findings

Below is a summary of the findings of the observation, based on the filled-out observation forms submitted by NAMFREL chapters.

On registration procedures:

Observers noted that Comelec staff were well-trained, registration materials were complete and functioning as planned at the time of observation, and throughout the observation period, there was a noted improvement in how things were being done compared to previous weeks in the same registration center.

For safety reasons, the number of registrants were being limited at the time of observation to 30 to 50 per day. Majority of the registration centers accepted both walk-in registrants, and those with prior appointments done through iRehistro, Facebook, or phone calls. However, some centers accepted only walk-in registrants, while few accepted only those with prior appointment.

In Pangasinan, NAMFREL observers reported that registration was also being done per barangay: people in each barangay were being told to register on particular dates.

For registrants who opted to make prior appointments, observers said that they were told that using iRehistro was more convenient, faster, and provided less possible exposure to Covid. However, registrants also said that making appointments online entailed additional cost as most of them had to go to an internet cafe or spend more for mobile data.

Some Comelec registration centers observed issued control numbers to registrants as they arrived, and people were accommodated on a first-come-first-served basis, but people with disabilities (PWDs), seniors, and the heavily pregnant were prioritized.

Most NAMFREL observers reported that registrants used blank forms distributed physically at the registration centers on the day of registration, while about a quarter said that registrants printed their own forms. In Lanao del Sur, registrants were being required to set an appointment in advance and print their own forms.

NAMFREL observers reported that registrants were turned away when the quota for walk-ins for the day was reached, and some were turned away because they did not bring valid IDs.

No unnecessary interruptions in the registration process were observed by NAMFREL observers throughout the period.

On health and safety protocols:

There was inconsistent implementation of health protocols inside the various registration centers observed throughout the observation period. Wearing of face masks, face shield, and physical distancing were enforced, but not always.

A majority--but not all--NAMFREL observers noted that: body temperature was being checked at the entrance; rubbing alcohol was being applied to hands prior to entry; physical distancing was consistently being enforced; registrants brought their own pens; and registrants were being required to sanitize their hands before signing in the signature pad and imprinting their thumbprints in the fingerprint scanner.

Only about half observed that registrants were being required to sanitize their hands before and after biometrics capturing, and that registration peripherals like fingerprint scanner, signature pad and pen, were being disinfected after every use. In some registration centers observed, Comelec staff were disinfecting the items after every use, but in some of those, disinfection was being done after about 5 registrants. Observers also noted that some centers did not have enough staff to do the disinfection, even if materials that could be used for disinfection (ex. alcohol, tissue, wet wipes) were available. Majority of NAMFREL observers did not see registrants themselves being the ones asked to sanitize the equipment and peripherals they used, as prescribed in Comelec Resolution No. 10674.

NAMFREL observed that many registrants who came together did not observe physical distancing from each other. There were Comelec staff who constantly reminded registrants to physically distance, but in some centers, there were not enough personnel to do this.

Despite these observations, NAMFREL observers noted positive developments or improvements from previous weeks of observation, like health declaration forms being made available, presence of more registration staff, more disinfection activities implemented, and general improvement in following health protocols.

On physical characteristics of COMELEC offices / registration centers:

Most of the registration centers observed were large enough and well-ventilated. However, NAMFREL observers noted that some centers did not have enough furniture for seating, for accomplishment of forms, for use in the waiting area (if any), and for other activities.

All registration centers observed were located in premises owned by the local government unit.

On the number of registrants:

There were very few registrants at the time of observation in most registration centers. About half of the filled-out forms returned by NAMFREL indicated less than 10 registrants at the time of observation. Some NAMFREL observers had to return to the registration center to observe again after no registrant turned up during their observation period.

Locals told NAMFREL observers some reasons that could account for the very low turnout: people under 21 years old, as well as senior citizens, were not allowed to leave the house; people were afraid to go out because of Covid; and no available public transportation. In Malabon, NAMFREL observers said people were afraid to register because the registration center was located beside a facility for Covid patients.

On the total time spent by registrants inside the center:

Most NAMFREL observers said that registrants took between 10 and 30 minutes to complete the registration process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

NAMFREL commends Comelec officers and staff throughout the country for being frontliners in ensuring that the 2022 National and Local Elections will have a good turnout of voters, and will be conducted in a safe and efficient manner.

To help further enhance the registration process and the preparations for the holding of the 2022 National and Local Elections, still amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, NAMFREL would like to offer the following recommendations to the Comelec:

For the registration process specifically:

- For Comelec registration centers nationwide to use an appointment system, but one that should not be limited to social media like Facebook, because many people do not have access to the internet. NAMFREL encourages the Comelec to ensure that all their offices have landlines and mobile numbers so that people could reach them to set appointments;

- Consider distributing paper print-outs of forms, perhaps in barangay halls;
- Consider holding registration in bigger facilities to accommodate more people but ensure physical distancing, and better ventilation;
- Consider doing mobile registration as early as possible in places with little or no Covid transmission reported;
- Consider tapping the network of parishes in the country to assist in voter registration, possibly using places of worship as registration centers;
- Encourage cooperation with the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to enable online registration of passport holders, whose biometrics data are already with the DFA.

For other activities related to the 2022 National and Local Elections:

- Ensure consistency in implementation of anti-Covid measures. While Comelec's anti-Covid measures were generally implemented and adhered to, they were done so in varying levels of consistency and adherence. It will be challenging, but the Comelec should target 100% adherence throughout the country, because a small slip could mean infection. A commitment to 100% safety and protection would also further encourage the electorate to go out and vote in May 2022.
- Further train election personnel in ensuring that anti-Covid measures are actually done and performed well, especially in disinfection of election materials and furniture
- Provide enough furniture for use of registrants, in offices that lack them
- Limit face to face transactions to 15 minutes or less