



NATIONAL CITIZENS' MOVEMENT FOR FREE ELECTIONS (NAMFREL)

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HONORABLE SHERIFF M. ABAS

Chairman
Commission on Elections
Palacio del Gobernador, Intramuros, Manila

Attention: Director Teopisto E. Elnas,Jr, Office of the Deputy Executive Director for Operations (DEDO)

Dear Chairman Abas,

The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) would like to congratulate the COMELEC for the holding of the simultaneous Mock Elections in different areas on the country on December 29, 2021.

NAMFREL deployed more than a hundred observers across the country to observe the mock elections. Please find below a summary of NAMFREL's observations during the activity, as well as recommendations both for the 2022 elections and for any forthcoming election day simulation. Some of the recommendations are similar to those already submitted in connection with the voting simulation activity in San Juan City in October 2021.

Observations	Recommendations
1. Opening process	
In general, Comelec staff and the teachers who served as members of the Electoral Boards (EB) reported early for duty (before 6am).	
Observers reported some delay in the initialization process for the vote counting machines (VCMs). In a voting center in Digos, Davao del Sur, NAMFREL observers reported that it took about an hour for the initialization process, which delayed the start of voting by about an hour. In a voting center in Pateros, the VCM rejected ballots several times. In Pasay City West Highschool, only one test ballot was available and the number of tries needed to feed the ballot was attributed to the ballot already being crumpled or had folds.	<p>Ensure that a qualified technical support person is available to provide assistance to the EB in the opening and closing process.</p> <p>Ensure that EBs are adequately trained to operate the VCMs.</p> <p>Provide more test ballots for use during initialization of the VCM.</p>
2. Voting process	
The voting process was generally smooth, with voters taking between 5 to 10 minutes to vote, and up to 30 minutes for senior citizens.	

Most polling places observed allowed up to 10 voters inside at any given time. However, in a polling place in Isabela, there were about 15-20 people inside at one point.	Ensure that the maximum number of allowed persons inside are observed.
In a polling place in Isabela, some observers from political parties were reportedly not allowed inside because they already reached the limit to the number of people permitted to stay inside the polling place.	NAMFREL encourages the COMELEC to find a way to ensure that all observers are allowed and able to do their work in the new normal process.
In a polling place in Zamboanguita, Negros Oriental, NAMFREL volunteers observed that several ballots were rejected by the VCM, and the members of the Electoral Board (EB) had to cut the sides of the ballot due to paper jam.	Ensure that the ballots are of appropriate width to fit in the VCM's ballot insertion slot. Ensure quality control in the production and packaging of the ballots.
In a polling place in Taguig, crowding has been observed around the VCM while voters insert their ballots. In the same polling place, lack of vote secrecy was also observed in the vote casting process as the ballots were not covered while being inserted into the VCM, allowing the people around to see the votes. In some polling places, it was impossible to use the ballot secrecy folders for this purpose because reportedly, they were taped to the chairs.	Ensure that ballot secrecy is maintained at all times.
In the voting set-up where the VCM was not located in the same room where voting was taking place, a NAMFREL observer was concerned that this could facilitate vote buying as a voter could easily take a photo of their ballot. A city mayor who dropped by the mock election in their city also pointed out that this set-up could open the opportunity for "ballot switching."	Ensure that voters are not allowed to take a photo of their ballots, especially in multi-room set-ups where voters are asked to take their ballot out of the voting room.
Some members of the Electoral Board interviewed prefer a single room set up where ballot issuance, voting, and vote casting are done in the same room. An EB chair cited her operational role that in case of problems with the VCM she had to leave her post to attend to the VCM which is in another room.	Consider prioritizing the single-room setup where ballot issuance, voting, and vote casting are done in the same room.
3. Closing and Counting processes	
Observers noted that in some polling places, there were too many people in the room during the counting process.	The COMELEC should consistently enforce covid-related protocols throughout election day.
In Pasay City West High School, iButtons	NAMFREL recommends that iButtons should

were in one packaging. It was further observed that one person can use all iButtons anytime during operations as the passwords were in the VCM operations guide/manual.	be individually packed with passwords in sealed envelopes. The iButton will act as the EB's signature; this is the first time that the EB will use their own digital signature. Like with any first time use, training and practice will help ease the EB into the processes.
4. Transmission of results	
Several voting centers observed had difficulty transmitting the results. While mobile signal in some municipalities were poor, in a voting center in Negros Oriental for example, there was very good signal strength from different providers, but transmission still failed several times. Observers in the area thought it could be a hardware issue, either the machine being used to transmit, or the broadband sticks being used.	NAMFREL suggests that a survey of transmission signals be conducted around each voting center.
In some voting centers observed, the VCM had to be taken out of the room to an open area where there was stronger signal.	Plan for alternative actions. The COMELEC could also provide EBs with transmission process guidelines, or a list of checks the EB can do to improve chances of transmission.
Observers noted that in some voting centers, there were too many people flocking the VCM during the transmission process, with lack of physical distancing.	The COMELEC should consistently enforce covid-related protocols throughout election day. The Commission could also deploy roving health protocol marshals inside the voting centers who would remind people to follow health protocols or assist in enforcing them.
5. Canvassing process	
In one canvassing center observed, there were no temperature checks at the entrance and physical distancing was not consistently enforced.	The COMELEC should consistently enforce covid-related protocols throughout election day.
6. Voting Center	
There was an express lane for seniors, PWDs, and the heavily pregnant.	
There was good mobile phone signal in most, but not all, of the voting centers observed.	
Emergency Accessible Polling Places (EAPPs) and Isolation Polling Places (IPPs)	NAMFREL suggests that COMELEC assign some individuals to play the role of voters

were present, but NAMFREL volunteers did not observe the IPPs being used, even for simulation purposes, except in a voting center in Albay.	who were determined to exhibit symptoms, to be able to simulate the process inside the IPPs.
The Voters' Assistance Desk (VAD) in some voting centers observed did not have a laptop that would have been used to search for names of voters. Instead, those manning the VAD relied on printed copies of PCVL – one for each of the established precincts that comprise the clustered precinct.	Provide laptops to easily assist voters in finding their information
The VAD became a choke point as arriving voters queued up. The purpose of VAD is to provide assistance to voters who did not know their assigned established precinct/clustered precinct. Not all voters who arrived needed to go through the VAD.	NAMFREL would like to recommend that COMELEC provide voters early with information on their assigned precincts as well as the exact location of said precincts, so that voters would not need to go through the VAD. COMELEC should try to ensure that these information – in the form of voter information sheets and other means, physical and digital – are delivered to the public a few weeks before election day. The COMELEC should revive the Find Precinct online service, and to allow election monitoring organizations to assist them in bringing this information to voters. COMELEC should also encourage other stakeholders, like election monitoring organizations, to assist in campaigning that the public should not ignore the information given to them, to help assure that there will not be confusion and crowding inside the voting centers on election day.
Many directional signs were small, insufficient in number, and not strategically located	NAMFREL would like to encourage the COMELEC to make signages with font sizes large enough to be read from a distance. Signages should be placed in the appropriate locations to prevent crowding and so that voters would not linger inside the voting center. They should also be in a language that most voters in the locality would understand.
7. COVID protocols	
The enforcement of certain health protocols was not consistent, namely physical distancing, proper wearing of masks, disinfection of hands, and disinfection of election materials like pens and chairs after every use.	NAMFREL encourages the COMELEC to ensure that health-related protocols are implemented consistently throughout the day, and throughout the country on election day. Ensure that protective gear, including gloves, are worn properly by election staff. The

	Commission could also deploy roving health protocol marshals inside the voting centers who would remind people to follow health protocols or assist in enforcing them.
NAMFREL volunteers noted that temperatures were being checked at the entrance; children were not being allowed to enter; and medical personnel were present onsite.	
In at least one voting center, the health station at the entrance was too close to the voting area.	Ensure that medical personnel's stations are located at a safe distance from where voters are located to prevent contamination in case some voters turn up with symptoms.
8. Others	
In general, the mock elections looked well-organized onsite, even though some stakeholders, including members of the EB, said that the preparation period in some areas was too short. Some NAMFREL volunteers who are also PPCRV provincial/diocesan coordinators said they were not informed by their local Comelec counterpart about the activity and their participation in the mock elections.	NAMFREL respectfully recommends that there should be a longer preparation time to ensure proper coordination with, and full participation from, all election stakeholders.
Observers noted that some teachers who served as members of the EB did not receive enough training, as they had to consult their manuals throughout the entire process because they were not sure what to do.	<p>NAMFREL urges the COMELEC to coordinate early with the DepEd to ensure that teachers who will serve as members of the EB will be properly informed and trained.</p> <p>Additionally, NAMFREL suggests that technicians and COMELEC citizens' arms be also invited during the training for EBs to help ensure proper coordination on election day.</p> <p>To further strengthen EBs, the COMELEC could explore giving an exam or certification for EB members.</p> <p>The COMELEC could also provide EBs with a set of instructions and solution for common problems, an FAQ with answers and/or a basic troubleshooting guide.</p>
Observers noted the presence of barangay officials, and members of the military and the police inside voting centers, with some even manning the voter assistance desks.	NAMFREL hopes that in the actual elections, unauthorized persons will not be allowed inside voting centers unless their presence is required in security-related situations.
NAMFREL notes the low turnout of mock poll voters.	The COMELEC could also consider giving invited voters/participants an incentive to show up (ex. snacks).

We hope that COMELEC would look at our recommendations favorably and that it would invite NAMFREL to observe forthcoming simulation exercises and testing.

Thank you very much.

Very truly yours,


AUGUSTO C. LAGMAN
National Chairperson

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