



NATIONAL CITIZENS' MOVEMENT FOR FREE ELECTIONS (NAMFREL)

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PRESS RELEASE

NAMFREL Bantay ng Bayan UPDATE #1

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NAMFREL releases preliminary observations on the 2022 Baliwag Plebiscite

The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) released its preliminary observations on the conduct of the December 17, 2022 Baliwag Plebiscite to ratify the conversion of the municipality into a component city. NAMFREL has been accredited by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) as citizens' arm for the Baliwag Plebiscite, and for this electoral exercise, NAMFREL has deployed an Election Expert Mission (EEM) to look into the issues surrounding the exercise, as well as to observe the process on plebiscite day. The members of the EEM are NAMFREL National Chairperson Angel Averia, Jr. (Lito Averia), NAMFREL Secretary General Eric Jude Alvia, and NAMFREL National Council Members Corazon Ignacio and Fernando Contreras, Jr. They are also joined by some members of the NAMFREL National Secretariat Team and other volunteers.

The NAMFREL team is currently onsite in different voting centers across Baliwag. The preliminary observations cover the opening procedures as well as the first few hours of voting, including arrangements inside the voting centers. Observations are contained in NAMFREL observation forms that are being sent in by the team electronically to NAMFREL headquarters.

The NAMFREL observers reported that in general, the conduct of the plebiscite has been smooth and peaceful, with most polling places opening on time, and with election paraphernalia and members of the different Plebiscite Committees (PlebCom) complete in most polling places observed. As of writing, NAMFREL volunteers have described the plebiscite as smooth, organized, and peaceful, with no untoward incidents observed.

Observers noted that the morning's activities are characterized by a low turnout of voters. NAMFREL volunteers reported a turnout of only 2% to 10% in polling places observed as of 10:30am. However, members of PlebComs believe that more voters will come after lunchtime.

Inside voting centers and polling places, NAMFREL volunteers reported that there are no voters' assistance desks in most of the voting centers observed so far. In the few that do, they are being manned by barangay officials. It took voters 2 to 10 minutes to secure their precinct numbers and sequence numbers. Once inside their polling places, NAMFREL volunteers reported that it took voters only 2 to 5 minutes to vote.

With regard to Covid-related protocols, 85% of reports received so far indicated that Covid-related protocols are being consistently enforced and followed. The protocols that are not being strictly followed are the proper wearing of face masks and disinfection of

hands and materials. Only half of the voting centers reported so far have Isolation Polling Places (IPPs) and have medical personnel present.

There are no Emergency Accessible Polling Places (EAPPs) in the voting centers observed so far, and not all voting centers have express lanes for senior citizens, PWDs, and the pregnant. In Engr. Vicente Cruz Memorial School in Barangay Tibag, a NAMFREL observer noted that an entrance to a polling station was very steep, and that "some of the PWDs and seniors had to be carried to vote." NAMFREL volunteers also noted that some voters, especially senior citizens, had difficulty not only in finding their names on the list, but also in finding the location of their polling places inside the voting center. There has been a lack of assistance to senior citizens in this part of the process in some of the voting centers observed. Observers noted also that not all voting centers have proper signages, precinct maps, and directional signs, hence voters have been having a hard time searching for their rooms. NAMFREL volunteers reported that some voters who could not find their polling place opted to go home instead.

Observers noted that there were some voters who came to vote wearing plebiscite campaign shirts for the YES vote. In Barangays Concepcion, Matangtubig, Pinagbarilan, and Sto. Cristo, NAMFREL observers reported seeing LGU watchers conducting a survey among voters asking how they voted. Observers reported seeing Libreng Sakay services offered to voters in some voting centers. However, in at least one voting center, a campaign tarp for the YES vote is attached to the service vehicle. The same kind of campaign tarp was also found attached to the gate of another voting center. Campaign tarps for the YES vote can still be found along the main roads in Baliwag.

In the run up to today's plebiscite, the NAMFREL EEM team observed that there was a strong campaign for the YES vote for the cityhood of Baliwag. Campaigns conducted by the municipal LGU in barangays with the Municipal Chief Executive explained the benefits of cityhood. Barangay officials reportedly went house-to-house, campaigning for the YES vote. There was no obvious campaign for a NO vote. Business leaders aired concern on the possible impact to business such as increase in real property tax and business licenses and fees. A farmer interviewed expressed concern that real property taxes on farm lands will increase. Citizens interviewed generally said that they fear increases in prices of commodities and generally do not understand the implications of Baliwag cityhood in spite of the strong campaign for a YES vote.

The COMELEC conducted an information campaign for people to participate through social media and house-to-house campaigns and had coordinated with various government agencies, including but not limited to the Department of Education, the Philippine National Police, Armed Forces of the Philippines, Bureau of Fire Protection, and others.

NAMFREL will continue to gather observations throughout the day. Voting will end at 3pm, and counting and canvassing of votes will commence after that. NAMFREL will be submitting a final report to the COMELEC on the findings of the observation, identifying areas that could be further strengthened, and recommending measures to help ensure the conduct of safer and more efficient electoral exercises. ###