



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

PRESS STATEMENT

March 10, 2022

NAMFREL welcomes the new COMELEC Chairman and Commissioners as it urges more transparency in the 2022 elections

NAMFREL wishes the new Chairman and Commissioners of the Commission on Elections (Comelec) all the best in their new posts. Their appointment comes at a crucial period as the Commission prepares for the upcoming May 9, 2022 elections.

Foremost of the challenges ahead is securing the elections and ensuring that it is conducted in a fair and free manner. The Automated Election System Law requires that the electoral process "shall be transparent and credible, and that the results shall be fast, accurate and reflective of the genuine will of the people" (Section 2, Republic Act No. 9369).

NAMFREL believes that the Commission's adherence to this policy of transparency and inclusivity is important in order to earn public confidence and to boost the integrity of the Commission, and of the elections.

NAMFREL commends efforts by the Comelec, the Department of Education, and the Department of Information and Communications Technology to require teachers who will serve in the Electoral Boards (EBs) to enroll in the Philippine National Public Key Infrastructure (PNPKI). The enrollment would have allowed them to use their personal digital signatures on the Election Returns. This would have enhanced the security of the 2022 election results compared to previous elections, when only a pre-generated signature of the vote-counting machine was used.

However, with only nine weeks before election day, NAMFREL expresses concern on the following issues in the preparations by the Comelec, as observed by stakeholders, and which were made public during the March 9, 2022 Senate Committee on Electoral Reforms and People's Participation hearing.

1. The difficulties met by Comelec in procuring the cable assembly needed to connect the I-Button readers to a server in order to produce the I-Buttons for digital signing. This has reduced the adoption of digital signing by the teachers who will serve as EBs merely to a pilot test in some areas, instead of nationwide. NAMFREL urges the Comelec to pursue other alternatives like seeking local companies with the capacity to fabricate the required cable assembly. A last resort, NAMFREL recommends making the election results transmission package -- which shall include the electronically transmitted election returns -- in protobuf format, which shall include the xml sig and public key certificates for validation available through the transparency server.

2. Observation of the ballot printing at the National Printing Office and in the operations at the Comelec Sta. Rosa warehouse has not been opened to election observation groups, including accredited citizens' arms. NAMFREL observers were invited to these in previous elections. NAMFREL urges the Comelec to open the ballot printing and the operations at the Sta. Rosa warehouse for observation by stakeholders, including accredited citizens' arms.

Stakeholders' request for information on the regional hubs which the COMELEC plans to set up with DOST and DICT, and to allow observation on election day, remains pending. NAMFREL recommends opening up the facilities for observation during the election period until termination of operations.

3. The unresolved issue of the alleged hacking reported on January 10, which may impact on the credibility of the election results, and which has the potential of inviting questions on the ability of the Comelec to secure the elections. NAMFREL recommends speedy resolution of the issue.

4. The lack of guidelines as of this date to open up observation by accredited election monitors of the operations in the various data centers where the Comelec Central Server, backup server, and the transparency server are located, including access to regional hubs. NAMFREL recommends the issuance of such guidelines and to allow stakeholders, including accredited citizens' arms, to field observers in the various data centers and regional hubs during the election period until termination of operations.

NAMFREL understands the challenges that the Comelec is facing as it prepares for the elections given the varying COVID-19 alert levels. However, this should not be an excuse to curtail observation activities and to deny access to pertinent data. The Comelec may livestream activities, such as ballot printing, logistics, and Pre-election Logic and Accuracy Test (preLAT), which is not new to the Commission, as it already streams on social media the e-Rallies of national candidates daily, and its Memorandum of Agreement signing events.

The Comelec should be commended for finding ways to ensure that voters and election workers will be safe on Election Day. However, it has been recommended that the Comelec extend this diligence to the pre-election and post-election periods, ensuring the safety of other election stakeholders like election monitoring organizations, media, political parties, and other concerned groups, without preventing said stakeholders from doing their monitoring work. The cornerstone of the trust and confidence bestowed on the elections is anchored on the inclusiveness and visibility of these various processes and information to the voting public. ###