



NATIONAL CITIZENS' MOVEMENT FOR FREE ELECTIONS (NAMFREL)

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NAMFREL Report on the Observation of the August 8, 2023, Automated Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) Elections (AES-BSKE) Mock Elections August 15, 2023

I. Introduction

On August 8, 2023, COMELEC held Mock Elections for the Automated Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) Elections (AES-BSKE). COMELEC Chairman George Erwin Garcia announced during a June 15, 2023 press conference the use of an Automated Election System for the BSKE. COMELEC En Banc approved the pilot testing of the AES-BSKE in February 2023.

The Mock Elections took place at two (2) voting centers in Quezon City and three (3) voting centers in Dasmariñas City, Cavite, which targets to reach fifty (50) voters at each polling place, including the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) voters. As set by the law for the conduct of BSKE, voting started at 7 AM. However, for this particular mock election, COMELEC set the closing of mock polls as early as 10 AM to be followed by canvassing of mock election results.

NAMFREL set out to participate in the August 8 mock elections not only to assist the COMELEC in ensuring that the October 30, 2023 Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections (BSKE) would be transparent and credible, but also to help COMELEC achieve its goal of ensuring that Philippine electoral processes are safe from COVID-19. Participation in the mock polls would be an opportunity for NAMFREL to be able to formulate recommendations based on actual on-the-ground observations to help COMELEC improve forthcoming electoral processes such as the BSKE, especially in the areas of conducting the different procedures, and in ensuring that voters, election staff, and other stakeholders are adequately protected health-wise.

II. NAMFREL Accreditation

On August 26, 2022, NAMFREL filed its Petition for Accreditation as COMELEC citizen's arm for the BSKE, at that time scheduled to be held on December 5, 2022. On September 6, 2022, NAMFREL filed before the COMELEC a Motion to Admit Supplemental Petition as citizen's arm for all electoral exercises, including special elections, plebiscites, initiatives, referendums, and recall elections (but not including regular elections), until May 12, 2025, National and Local Elections, subject to the availability of resources, manpower, and reasonable time to organize and deploy.

COMELEC heard NAMFREL's Petition for Accreditation on September 13, 2022. A day later, COMELEC granted NAMFREL Accreditation as the citizens' arm for all electoral exercises, including special elections, plebiscites, initiatives, referendums, and recall elections (but not including regular elections).

NAMFREL applied to be authorized to do the following, among others, for all electoral exercises, including the AES-BSKE Mock Elections:

- To provide informational assistance to the voters;
- To observe the activities during the electoral exercise period, including but not limited to the delivery and reception of materials; barangay assemblies, fora or "pulong pulongs"; and other information and campaign activities;
- To observe the activities on voting day;
- To assist the COMELEC in ensuring that the electoral exercises would be transparent and credible;
- To perform all other activities as the COMELEC may deem necessary.

III. NAMFREL Observation Teams

NAMFREL organized and deployed on August 8, 2023, teams of observers for the following Voting Centers for the mock elections.

1. Pasong Tamo Elementary School, Quezon City
2. Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School, Quezon City
3. Dasmariñas Elementary School, Dasmariñas City, Cavite
4. Pintong Gubat Elementary School, Dasmariñas City, Cavite
5. Paliparan III Elementary School, Dasmariñas City, Cavite

The observation teams were equipped with observation forms for the opening of voting, voting procedures, the voting center, closing and counting procedures, canvassing procedures, and incident reports. The filled-out observation forms will be analyzed and shall be the basis of NAMFREL in writing the content of its final report for the AES-BSKE Mock Elections observation.

IV. Mock Elections Day Observation

A. Opening

NAMFREL observed that most of the polling places opened on time. However, in Dasmariñas Elementary School, all polling places failed to open on time because the election equipment, materials, and paraphernalia were not prepared on time by the members of the Electoral Board (EB). In the same voting center, one of the polling places was not unlocked earlier prior to the preparation. Before voting began, materials and equipment were readied and checked for

completeness. However, at a polling place in Pasong Tamo Elementary School, a NAMFREL observer noticed that the Electoral Board (EB) had a brief struggle setting up the vote counting machine (VCM), which was eventually resolved. Similarly, at a polling place in Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School, a NAMFREL observer observed that EB members initially had trouble locating the marking pens.

Observers described the opening of voting as peaceful and encountered no untoward incidents. Observers also noted that there were few to no lines of voters seen during the opening of voting in most voting centers.

B. Voting

NAMFREL observers reported that the voting process was generally smooth in many polling places. However, there were instances where issues arose, particularly related to the feeding of the ballots into the machines. The observers noted that some EBs seemed unfamiliar with the correct procedures for handling ballot feeding.

In Dasmariñas Elementary School and Paliparan III Elementary School in Dasmariñas City, Cavite, as well as in Pasong Tamo Elementary School in Quezon City, instances of ballot jams occurred due to voters improperly inserting their ballots into the machines. At Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School and Dasmariñas Elementary School, there were also cases where the vote counting machines (VCMs) misread the ballots.

In Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School, an EB member corrected the ballot's orientation by removing it from the secrecy folder. Meanwhile, at Dasmariñas Elementary School, the Department of Education Supervisor Official (DESO) decided to replace the VCM twice due to different issues. The first replacement VCM failed to read multiple ballots, and the second replacement failed to print a Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), leading to a third machine replacement.

At Dasmariñas ES, some voters were not properly informed about the purpose of the mock election. A NAMFREL observer witnessed a voter searching for the name of the "actual" candidate they intended to vote for. Upon not finding it, the voter wrote the candidate's name on the ballot. The EB then explained to the voter the purpose of the Mock Elections and provided another ballot for proper voting.

Peace and Order, and People Management

According to NAMFREL observers, many voting centers experienced unnecessary crowding in various areas. Inside Pasong Tamo Elementary School, a NAMFREL volunteer described the situation as "chaotic." Furthermore, in the same location, there was an incident where a large

number of Local Government Unit (LGU) watchers contributed to crowding, leading to discomfort for some voters.

At Paliparan III Elementary School, certain Barangay personnel were observed loitering around the polling place with unclear intentions. In Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School, a NAMFREL observer noticed politicians entering the polling place despite not being voters themselves.

Some voting centers had a noticeable presence of Philippine National Police (PNP) personnel near the entrances. In Dasmariñas Elementary School, a NAMFREL observer reported an incident where a policeman entered a polling place and inquired about voter turnout. At Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School and Pintong Gubat Elementary School, NAMFREL observers noticed that some PNP members inside the voting centers seemed unaware of the ongoing mock election. Additionally, it remained unclear to the observers what role the PNP played inside the voting centers during the mock election.

In Paliparan III Elementary School, a NAMFREL observer observed a gathering of Barangay watchers/personnel outside the polling place. At Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School, a NAMFREL observer pointed out a Barangay watcher who was taking photos of the Posted Computerized Voters list, which includes voters' addresses and might pose a privacy concern.

Vote Secrecy

While secrecy of the voting was maintained in the polling places most of the time, NAMFREL observers reported that many voters did not use the ballot secrecy folders while voting, and in some instances, while feeding the ballots to the VCM due to the machines not accepting and/or reading the ballots properly. Vote secrecy might be at risk while the ballots are not covered by the secrecy folders.

In Pintong Gubat ES, a cameraman of a media entity was seen breaching protocols as he was pointing a camera at the printed VVPAT of the voter. An EB member asked the cameraman to refrain from doing so as it is prohibited. In Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. HS, a cameraman was also seen taking videos of a voter voting and his ballot.

Adherence to Covid-19 Protocols

Despite the lifting of the national health emergency status, the COMELEC's voting guidelines emphasize the importance of following anti-Covid 19 measures. These measures include routine temperature screenings, maintaining a distance of at least 1 meter between individuals, and wearing face masks while within the voting premises. NAMFREL observers noticed that a significant number of voters and bystanders were not strictly adhering to the 1-meter physical

distancing rule, and a few were even without face masks. Furthermore, there were occurrences where individuals congregated in specific areas within the voting center, leading to instances of overcrowding.

Emergency Accessible Polling Place (EAPP) and Voters' Assistance Desk (VAD)

NAMFREL observers noted that Emergency Accessible Polling Places (EAPPs) were available in all voting centers observed. Voters' Assistance Desks (VADs) were also set up in most voting centers. However, EAPPs were only used in Dasmariñas Elementary School, Pintong Gubat Elementary School, Paliparan III ES, and Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School. Most VADs were manned by Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) volunteers. In Pintong Gubat Elementary School and Paliparan III Elementary School, NAMFREL observers noted that members of the PNP assisted the PPCRV volunteers in manning the VAD.

Voters took approximately 2-3 minutes to get to their polling place upon entering the voting center. The VAD personnel in some voting centers assisted the voters by helping them look for their names in the list and get them to their respective polling places. Express lanes for senior citizens, PWDS, and pregnant women were also observed in Judge Feliciano Belmonte Sr. High School, Dasmariñas Elementary School, Paliparan III Elementary School, and Pintong Gubat Elementary School. In Pintong Gubat Elementary School, NAMFREL observers noted that many voters were confused due to the lack of instructions and signage inside the voting center. The voters were later on assisted by members of the EB on where to enter and exit the polling place and voting center.

Electoral Board

NAMFREL observers noted that the EB members in most voting centers seemed to be unfamiliar with the procedures in spite of receiving training. In Pasong Tamo ES, a NAMFREL observer noted that the members of the EB in a polling place struggled during the voting process. In Dasmariñas ES, Pintong Gubat ES, and Paliparan III ES, NAMFREL volunteers noted that the EBs referred to their manual most of the time. There were also instances when they relied mostly on COMELEC personnel assigned to their area.

C. Closing and Counting

NAMFREL observers described the closing and counting as smooth and on time in most polling places observed. However, the following were observed in some polling places:

- In a polling place in Pasong Tamo Elementary School, members of the EB had some difficulties in shutting down the machine.
- In the same voting center, the printing of Election Returns (ERs) was delayed due to multiple printing jams, resulting in longer closing and counting times.

- While members of the EB were quite aware of the process, there were instances when they would still consult each other on whether the procedures were right or wrong.
- Members of the EB in most polling places observed followed the correct procedures for removing SD cards and sealing them in designated envelopes.
- Most polling places recorded high turnout of voters (95%-100%) which includes Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) voters.

NAMFREL observers also witnessed the opening of ballot boxes, sealing of filled-out ballots, tearing of unused ballots, and turning over sealed SD cards to the Barangay Canvassing Centers.

Voter Turnout

NAMFREL observers observed a significant turnout of voters during the AES-BSKE Mock Elections, yet they also noticed a conspicuous absence or a notably low presence of Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) voters.

D. Canvassing

NAMFREL observers also followed the canvassing procedures in Barangay Canvassing Centers in Barangay Pasong Tamo, Barangay Dasmariñas, and Barangay Paliparan III. While the SD cards were delivered punctually to the BOCs, a few issues were observed during the canvassing process:

- In Barangay Paliparan III Canvassing Center, NAMFREL observers noted that members of the Board of Canvassers (BOC) looked unfamiliar with the canvassing process, solely relying on the guidance of the COMELEC Support Team.
- In the same canvassing center, the compact disc (CD) was not readable and had no backups.
- In Barangay Pasong Tamo Canvassing Center, the canvassing procedure was delayed, starting only at 1:15 PM. The members of the BOC did not disclose the reason why the procedure was delayed. The SD card was seen by observers being tried on multiple CCS laptops before the manual upload was successful.
- In the same canvassing center, the projection of the manual uploading was blurry and could not be adequately seen by watchers.

NAMFREL observers noted the lack of familiarity with the canvassing procedures of the members of the Barangay Board of Canvassers (BBOC) as most of them had difficulties in setting up the system and in following contingency measures during the canvassing. While the Board of Canvassers encountered difficulties, NAMFREL observers did not find any discrepancies throughout the canvassing process.

To see photos from the NAMFREL observation, visit this Google Drive link:
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1P86PWYgzA8CUVCPPL0DyewPwBUtftkXq?usp=sharing>

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Mock Elections for the Automated BSKE (AES-BSKE) was generally peaceful. Despite the absence of any observed incidents that could compromise the integrity of the electoral process, the presence of large crowds inside the voting centers and outside polling places caused an uncomfortable environment for voters. In light of these observations, NAMFREL recommends the implementation of stricter protocols for managing voting centers, particularly in relation to bystanders. NAMFREL also suggests using bigger classrooms and adult-sized chairs in polling places to give voters a better and more comfortable voting experience.

While it was just a voting simulation, NAMFREL believes that it is important for the implementors of such exercises in voting centers and polling places to take the process more seriously, observing a high standard of integrity, transparency, and credibility throughout the execution of such electoral exercises.

Additionally, NAMFREL suggests a broader and more active effort to provide voters with clear information, especially about the fundamental goals of electoral activities, including the conduct of mock elections.

In connection with the observations related to canvassing, NAMFREL recommends a more comprehensive training for the members of the Board of Canvassers (BOC), to enhance their understanding of the protocols during the canvassing process.

NAMFREL also recommends that barangays with only one clustered precinct be included in future voting simulation exercises. The counting and canvassing process for such barangays should be described in detail and adequately imparted to the EBs that will handle such barangays, especially the preparation of documents such as the Statement of Votes and Certificate of Proclamation.

NAMFREL would also like to reiterate its recommendations related to the automated election system in the Philippines, contained on pages 73 to 77 of its Final Report to the COMELEC on NAMFREL's observation of the 2022 National and Local Elections. NAMFREL submitted the said report to the COMELEC on 6 December 2022 via email. It is also available online here: [https://namfrel.org.ph/2022/files/NAMFREL%202022%20NLE%20REPORT%20\(FINAL,%20DIGITAL\).pdf](https://namfrel.org.ph/2022/files/NAMFREL%202022%20NLE%20REPORT%20(FINAL,%20DIGITAL).pdf)

NAMFREL would also like to reiterate its previous recommendations encouraging the COMELEC to consider:

1. Further emphasizing the importance of vote secrecy, not only during the training of election personnel but also in voter information/education;
2. Further emphasizing in info dissemination to election personnel and to voters that it is the voter who inserts the ballot into the VCM and not the EBs;
3. Ensuring that a bigger venue is provided for the reception of election paraphernalia, to avoid crowding;
4. Reviewing the amount of forms to be filled out and audit logs to be printed, to shorten the closing process and to use less paper.

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