



NATIONAL CITIZENS' MOVEMENT FOR FREE ELECTIONS (NAMFREL)

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NAMFREL Report on the Observation of the 2022-2023 Resumption of Voter Registration March 2, 2023

Introduction

NAMFREL's observation of the 2022-2023 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 Philippine electoral exercises, especially 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 register for the 2023 Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections (2023 BSKE), as well as to provide a third-party citizen oversight of electoral processes. The activity was done in coordination with local Comelec offices, and in accordance with health regulations in place.

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. Towards the end of the registration period, more NAMFREL chapters participated in the observation by covering registration centers in their respective areas.

NAMFREL chapters were instructed to deploy at least one observer to observe the voter registration process, and to submit at least four (4) observation forms: either observing the same voter registration center on four different days, or to observe four voter registration centers during the registration period. The observers were instructed to be physically present to observe the process for at least one hour each time.

The observers were guided by an observation form/questionnaire, in paper form and in Google Forms version to facilitate ease of submission of data to NAMFREL national headquarters. There were 49 questions on the form based on Comelec's published guidelines for the resumption of voter registration (COMELEC Resolution No. 10868).

To further prepare the volunteers for the observation, an online briefing was held on November 24, 2022 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 carried out by NAMFREL chapters in the areas enumerated below.

Luzon:

Pangasinan
Nueva Ecija
La Union
Zambales
Batangas
Cavite
Quezon
Rizal

Oriental Mindoro
Catanduanes
Camarines Norte
Camarines Sur

NCR:

Las Piñas
Mandaluyong

Manila

Muntinlupa
Navotas
Pasay City
San Juan City

Visayas:

Guimaras

Iloilo
Leyte
Biliran
Negros Oriental
Eastern Samar

Mindanao:
Misamis Oriental
Zamboanga del Sur
Sarangani
Basilan
Davao del Norte

South Cotabato
Agusan del Norte
Agusan del Sur
Cotabato City
Surigao del Sur

NAMFREL chapters carried out their observations throughout the voter registration period, from December 12, 2022 to January 31, 2023.

Critical information that were gleaned from the observation activity include:

- Enforcement and adherence to health and safety protocols
- Physical characteristics of COMELEC offices / registration centers
- Number of registrants
- Total time spent by registrants inside the registration centers

Some specific activities monitored in the registration centers were entry procedures, the 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 participating NAMFREL chapters.

On the registration procedures:

While there were only a few registrants showing up at the registration centers at the start of the registration period, predictably, the numbers swelled in the last week of voter registration, with observers noting that more than a hundred registrants turned up during their time of observation, especially those held in malls.

Most registration centers observed implemented measures to manage or limit the number of registrants per day, by having a cut-off time in the afternoon to stop accepting more registrants, or having a quota system in which the centers limited the number of registrants to 300, 500, or 700 applicants. In satellite registrations held in schools, youth registrants were accommodated by grade or year level. More than half of the registration centers observed implemented special procedures for queueing, such as distributing control numbers, or allowing entry by batches of 50 for example.

Most of the registration centers observed accepted walk-in registrants, with about 30% accepting both walk-in registrants and those with prior appointments. Local Comelec offices that used an appointment system utilized their respective Facebook pages to do so, or allowed applicants to contact them by phone. NAMFREL observers spoke with some registrants who made prior appointments to register, and the general impression is that for those who had prior appointments, they felt that the process was easier for them to understand and go through, resulting to a shorter period of time spent inside the registration centers.

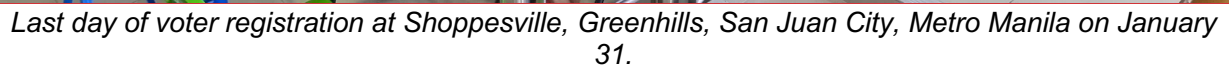
Almost 90% of registration centers observed had registrants securing their blank application forms inside the center on the day of their registration. In this recently concluded voter registration period, the iRehistro website, which allowed registrants in previous voter registration periods to pre-fill and print their application forms prior to appearing in the registration centers, seemed to be unavailable.



Resumption of voter registration at SM Southmall, Las Piñas City, Metro Manila on December 12, 2022



Last day of voter registration at Robinsons Mall, Limketkai Center, Cagayan de Oro City on January 31.



On the physical arrangements in the registration centers:

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politically neutral place, due to the fact that they were located in city halls, municipal halls, and other venues owned and run by local government units.



Voter education and satellite voter registration held in Dumaguete City High School on January 9



Voter registration at Shoppesville, Greenhills on January 30.



Satellite voter registration held in Brgy. Pili, Sariaya, Quezon on January 24

NAMFREL observers assessed that most of the registration centers observed were big enough for the activity, had windows, were well-ventilated, and provided express lanes for senior citizens, the heavily pregnant, and persons with disabilities (PWDs). Most of the venues also had visible and clear directional signages, and markings or stickers on the floors and hallways.

While observers noted that most of the registration centers had enough furniture for seating, for accomplishment of forms and for use in waiting areas, about 16% of venues did not have enough chairs, resulting to registrants sitting on floors, staircases, or just standing.

According to NAMFREL observers, almost all registration centers observed had an adequate number of personnel. However, NAMFREL observers suggested that for future registration periods, the Comelec should deploy more personnel in Step 1 in the registration center, with separate personnel assigned to answer questions or address general concerns from the crowd, aid in the distribution of forms, assist members of the vulnerable sectors such as senior citizens, the heavily pregnant and PWDs, and to manage the queues. NAMFREL observers added that it is in this step of the process where Comelec needs to add more furniture for use of the applicants.

One hundred percent of the observations indicated that registration / Comelec personnel appeared well-trained or knowledgeable of their tasks, all needed registration equipment and materials were complete, and all registration equipment functioned normally during the time NAMFREL observers spent inside the registration centers. However, in Step 2 of the process where names of the registrants were being recorded, NAMFREL observers suggested that Comelec use computers instead of manually logging-in names using log books.



Voter registration at the Comelec office in Lamitan, Basilan on January 31

On health and safety protocols:

The wearing of face masks was not anymore made compulsory during the registration period, but NAMFREL observers felt that the Covid protocols should still have been strictly enforced and followed due to the number of people in the registration centers. More than half of registration centers observed did not strictly enforce health and safety protocols, especially the proper wearing of face masks, maintaining physical distancing, and disinfection of hands.

NAMFREL observers noted in almost 70% of observations submitted: that registrants were not being required to sanitize their hands before signing in the signature pad and imprinting their thumbprints

in the fingerprint scanner; that registrants were not being required to sanitize their hands before and after biometrics capturing; and that registration peripherals like fingerprint scanners and signature pads and pens were not being disinfected after every use, as required in the Comelec's published guidelines for the resumption of voter registration.

Conclusion and Recommendations

NAMFREL commends Comelec officers and staff throughout the country for being frontliners in ensuring that the 2022-2023 Voter Registration Process was conducted in a safe and efficient manner. NAMFREL also commends Comelec in implementing the Register Anywhere Project (RAP), allowing people outside the place where the applicant plans to vote to register, to transfer their registration, and later permitting (a) overseas voters to transfer back to local, (b) residents in RAP sites to register, (c) senior citizens and persons with disabilities to register or update their records, and (d) deactivated voters to apply for reactivation.¹

For Comelec

To help further enhance future voter registration activities and the preparations for the holding of the 2023 Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections (BSKE), still amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, NAMFREL would like to offer the following recommendations to the Comelec, reiterating most of the recommendations previously made for voter registration:

- Ensure strict implementation of basic anti-Covid measures;
- Further train election personnel in procedures as prescribed in Comelec guidelines, especially in ensuring that anti-Covid measures are strictly enforced, like in the disinfection of election materials and furniture;
- Provide ways and further encourage registrants to download and print their own forms, or to make paper forms available in advance in other locations like barangay offices, to reduce queueing in the registration centers and to avoid crowding in the section where they are filled out;
- Consider having a longer voter registration period to allow more people to register;
- To help decrease the crowding in voter registration centers, the Comelec could: (a) Expand the use of an appointment system and to announce this in advance, so that registrants could be distributed evenly throughout the registration period; (b) Consider conducting the voter registration per barangay, within the barangays themselves so that registrants will not have to travel far from their places of residence; (c) Continue having more satellite registration centers like malls and other large venues, for the convenience of registrants; (d) Continue and add more days for conducting voter registration in schools. This would also allow schools to help instill responsible citizenship and the value of the right of suffrage to their students; (e) Consider holding voter registration even on Sundays for people who work throughout the week;
- Improve awareness of satellite registration center locations, publicizing them in advance so that prospective applicants could plan accordingly;
- Inside voter registration centers, provide more furniture like chairs and tables for the convenience of registrants and to ensure enough physical distancing, especially in Step 1 of the process;
- Inside voter registration centers, use computers instead of log-books in logging names of registrants, to help make the process faster, efficient, and help make voters' information more secure;
- Inside voter registration centers, consider installing more windows or counters so that more registrants could be processed at any given time;

¹<https://comelec.gov.ph/?r=VoterRegistration/PressReleases/06Jan2023Advisory>,
<https://comelec.gov.ph/?r=VoterRegistration/PressReleases/12Jan2023pr>

- Inside voter registration centers, the Comelec should require putting up signages that would explain to the registrants the flow of the whole registration process, on boards that could easily be read and understood, so that registrants may be guided accordingly, and to help decrease lingering and loitering inside registration centers;
- Explore ways to conduct voter registration remotely or via electronic means that would not require or substantially lessen the need for physical appearance inside Comelec facilities or other voter registration venues.

NAMFREL reiterates its recommendations to the Comelec with regard to the Register Anywhere Project (RAP), contained in a letter to the Comelec En Banc on December 8, 2022:

- Provide alternative means and methods of communication for technology challenged citizens who may be qualified to vote and who opt to take advantage of the RAP. Specifically, NAMFREL recommends that applicants be given phone numbers to call, or an office to go to (in the city/municipality where they applied to register), by a certain date, to inquire about the status of their applications. These are important to those who do not have smartphones nor email addresses, such as applicants residing in Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas, for Indigenous Peoples voters, and vulnerable sectors;
- Provide proper information to the applicant on what follows after the COMELEC EO or RAP Team has received applicant's application form, that the application has yet to undergo ERB hearing, the schedule of such hearing, and how the applicant shall be informed of the results of such hearing whether such information shall be posted on the bulletin board at the respective local COMELEC Offices in the city/municipality, COMELEC website, or official social media pages of the COMELEC OEO, by text messages or that applicants be given phone numbers to call, or an office to go to (in the city/municipality where they applied to register), by a certain date, to inquire about the status of their applications. NAMFREL further recommends providing information in other major languages spoken nationwide;
- Consider having more locations for RAP, including those areas where major universities are located, as well as business districts such as, for example, downtown Makati and BGC where employees temporarily live because of their work; and if expanded to other regions, to include places such as Cebu City, Zamboanga City, Cagayan de Oro City, Davao City, and Baguio City because a lot of students and workers from other provinces live there;
- Conduct a more intensified public information be conducted about the RAP, especially what students, workers and other transients can accomplish by taking advantage of this opportunity being given by COMELEC.

For Congress

In addition, NAMFREL reiterates² its calls on the Legislature to consider passing a law allowing a data sharing agreement between the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and the Comelec in order to dispense with the voter registration process. This would save time and costs not only for the local Comelec offices but also for would-be voters who have to line up even before the sun has risen just to be able to submit their applications.

The Legislature may study and adopt the system used in Indonesia, where the government is mandated to provide data on the population of potential election voters to be used by the Indonesian General Elections Commission (KPU) for compiling the voters list. The data given to KPU comes

² [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), [https://namfrel.org.ph/2022/files/NAMFREL%20Report%20on%20the%20Limited%20Observation%20of%20the%20Resumption%20of%20Voter%20Registration%20\(Aug.%2010,%202022\)%20\(1\).pdf](https://namfrel.org.ph/2022/files/NAMFREL%20Report%20on%20the%20Limited%20Observation%20of%20the%20Resumption%20of%20Voter%20Registration%20(Aug.%2010,%202022)%20(1).pdf)

from people registered in the electronic "Citizen Identity Card" scheme, the national ID system of their country.

NAMFREL also calls on the Legislature to consider passing a law mandating the PSA and the Civil Registrars nationwide to submit to the Comelec the information of deceased persons so that they can be purged from the voter registration database. NAMFREL also urges that a law be passed allowing data on citizens turning 15 years old for purposes of the SK elections, and 18 years old for purposes of regular elections, plebiscites, referenda, etc., to be shared by the Civil Registrars with COMELEC. In all instances, these would be subject to Data Sharing Agreements in accordance with Republic Act No. 10173 or the Data Privacy Act.

Finally, NAMFREL urges the Legislature to repeal *"Any person who did not vote in the two (2) successive preceding regular elections as shown by their voting records"* as a ground for deactivation under Section 27 of Republic Acts No. 8189 (for local voters) and 9189, as amended by R.A. 10590 (for overseas voters). Voters should not be penalized for the failure to exercise their right to choose our leaders, and then line up before sunrise to apply for reactivation. Instead, they should be encouraged to vote through the adoption of voting technology (for example, Internet voting) and/or mechanisms (polling places close to their residences), and enlightened on the importance of their choice and how they can exercise it.

If the reason for including failure to vote as a ground for deactivation is that those who failed to vote may have done so because of death, this would be addressed by the PSA and the Civil Registrars nationwide submitting information of deceased persons to the Comelec. ###