



## **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

### **NAMFREL Report on the Observation of the March 18, 2023 Marawi Plebiscites April 18, 2023**

#### **Introduction**

On March 18, 2023, plebiscites were held in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur to ratify the creation of Barangays Boganga II and Datu Dalidigan. The exercise involved 1,472 registered voters in two barangays in Marawi City, voting in five polling places located in Bito Elementary School and Kilala Primary School.

The plebiscites were based on Marawi City Ordinance No. 07-010 Series of 2022, creating Barangay Boganga II from the mother barangay of Bonganga, and Marawi City Ordinance No. 05-010 Series of 2022, creating Barangay Datu Dalidigan from the mother barangay of Sagonsongan.<sup>1</sup>

NAMFREL set out to participate in the March 18 plebiscites not only to assist the COMELEC in ensuring that the election 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 plebiscite 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, especially in the areas of conducting the different procedures, and in ensuring that voters, election staff, and other stakeholders are adequately protected health-wise.

#### **NAMFREL Accreditation**

On August 26, 2022, NAMFREL filed its Petition for Accreditation as COMELEC citizen's arm for the Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections (BSKE) (then scheduled to be held on December 5, 2022). The petition was docketed as SPP Case No. 22-004. 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 the 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 the Accreditation as citizen's arm for all electoral exercises, including special elections, plebiscites, initiatives, referendums, and recall elections (but not including regular elections).

NAMFREL applied/prayed to be authorized to do the following, among others, for all electoral exercises:

---

<sup>1</sup> COMELEC Resolution No. 10833 (2023), available at [https://comelec.gov.ph/php-tpls-attachments/References/ComelecResolutions/Plebiscites/PlebisciteBogangallDatuDaligan/com\\_res\\_10833.pdf](https://comelec.gov.ph/php-tpls-attachments/References/ComelecResolutions/Plebiscites/PlebisciteBogangallDatuDaligan/com_res_10833.pdf) (last visited 17 Apr. 2023).

- 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.

## **NAMFREL Plebiscite Day Observation**

Volunteers of NAMFREL's Lanao del Sur provincial chapter were deployed to the voting centers to observe plebiscite day activities. They were grouped into teams and observed in the polling places located in the two schools that served as voting centers. The teams were guided by forms prepared by NAMFREL HQ in accordance with internationally accepted standards on election observation. NAMFREL Lanao del Sur observed the different processes on election day: opening, voting, closing, counting, and canvassing. The observers also had separate observation forms for the voting center and its immediate environment, and for election-related incidents. During the observation, aside from looking at the transparency and credibility of the process, NAMFREL put focus on highlighting the effectiveness of the implementation of COMELEC's anti-COVID protocols, to be able to identify areas that could be further strengthened, and to recommend measures to help ensure that forthcoming elections and electoral exercises will be conducted in a safe manner. Questions on the forms related to procedures and anti-COVID protocols were based on COMELEC published guidelines for the Marawi plebiscites (COMELEC Resolution No. 10894).<sup>2</sup>

## **Observations**

### **A. Pre-opening, opening, and voting**

NAMFREL observers reported that in general, the conduct of the plebiscite was peaceful, characterized by a high turnout of voters. As early as 9:30am in one polling place in Bito Elementary School, 133 out of 142 registered voters had already cast their votes. In another polling place in the same school, 275 out of 329 voters had already voted by 10am. According to NAMFREL observers, the high turnout could be attributed to the people's eagerness to vote. There was also free transportation provided to those who wanted to go to the voting centers, a project started by the city government prior to this plebiscite and originally intended for use of indigenous peoples. NAMFREL observers also noted that there was a high turnout of youth voters.

---

<sup>2</sup> Available at

<https://comelec.gov.ph/?r=References/ComelecResolutions/Plebiscites/PlebisciteBogangalIDatuDaligan/res10894> (last visited 17 Apr. 2023).



Electoral Board at Kilala Primary School (Image credit: NAMFREL Lanao del Sur)

The voter turnout resulted in crowding inside the voting centers, especially in looking for their names on the voter lists. While the Plebiscite Committees (PlebComs) tried to limit the number of voters inside polling places to 10 voters at any given time, Covid protocols were not strictly enforced and followed, especially physical distancing and wearing of face masks. Voters took two to three minutes to cast their votes.



Queue at voting in a polling place at Bito Elementary School

NAMFREL observers did not see any express lanes for senior citizens, PWDs, and the heavily pregnant, but they were prioritized in voting. There were no Emergency Accessible Polling Places (EAPPs). There were also no Isolation Polling Places (IPPs) seen, but medical teams from the city health office were present inside the voting centers.

## B. Closing and Counting

NAMFREL observers reported that the two polling places in Bito Elementary School -- one of two voting centers used for the plebiscites -- ended voting early and had already conducted the counting process before 3pm when voting was supposed to end.



According to PlebCom's tally at the time of reporting, only three voters (two from one polling place and only one for the other) did not come to vote in this school in the plebiscite. NAMFREL observers said they did not anymore see voters who came while counting was being done before the 3pm cutoff. In the other voting center used -- Kilala Primary School -- all three polling places in the school ended voting on time at 3pm.

NAMFREL observers also reported that counting in the polling places went on without incident, and that the PlebComs appeared knowledgeable of the process.



Counting at Kilala Primary School

## Recommendations

NAMFREL would like to reiterate some of its recommendations put forth in its reports on the observation of past plebiscites, based on its observations during the March 18, 2023 Marawi plebiscites.

NAMFREL respectfully recommends:

1. That Emergency Accessible Polling Places (EAPPs) be made available in all electoral exercises. NAMFREL further recommends the conduct of a detailed study to address voters' concerns such as being able to personally cast his/her ballot while availing of the EAPP.
2. That Voter Assistance Desks (VADs) be made available in all electoral exercises.

NAMFREL also encourages the COMELEC to emphasize to the members of electoral boards in future exercises to honor the time when they are supposed to end the voting process by not ending it earlier than stipulated, to ensure that all voters who might come late will be able to vote.

NAMFREL would also like to reiterate some of its previous recommendations to the COMELEC for the conduct of future manual electoral exercises, such as the forthcoming Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections (BSKE):

1. To provide adequate training for members of Electoral Boards (EBs) on the manual process, particularly in the manual counting of votes. The coming Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections (BSKE) will be conducted manually where voters will write the names of their chosen candidates for certain elective posts. It is recommended that the training program for EBs include the rules of appreciation of the (manual) ballot as provided for in Section 211 of Batas Pambansa Bilang 881 or the Omnibus Election Code;
2. To further emphasize the importance of vote secrecy, not only during the training of election personnel, but also in voter information/education;
3. To conduct a study on granting election day holiday for workers and/or students who are qualified to vote to enable such workers and students to participate in the electoral (plebiscite) exercise, especially those whose places of work or school are outside the jurisdiction of the local government unit;
4. To consider adopting internet voting and other technologies that would allow more voters, especially those currently outside their place of registration, to participate in similar plebiscites. If a law is necessary, NAMFREL would be ready to support such law;
5. To ensure the consistency in implementation of anti-COVID measures. COMELEC should target 100% adherence, because a slight lapse could mean infection, especially in areas where vaccination rates are low. A commitment to 100% safety and protection would also further encourage the electorate to go out and participate in COMELEC's forthcoming electoral exercises;
6. To involve the youth sector beyond the participation of the SK Federation in LGU-led efforts for such electoral exercises.

###