



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 2023 Cavite District 7 Special Election for District Representative

The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) released its preliminary observations on the conduct of the February 25, 2023 Special Election in Cavite District 7 for District Representative. District 7 of Cavite Province is composed of the municipalities of Amadeo, Indang, and Tanza, and the city of Trece Martires. NAMFREL has been accredited by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) as citizens' arm for the Cavite Special Election, and for this electoral exercise, NAMFREL has deployed a team of observers, led by National Chairperson Angel S. Averia, Jr. (Lito Averia) and Secretary General Eric Jude O. Alvia, to observe the election day procedures. NAMFREL also observed in some voting centers on February 19 the final testing and sealing (FTS) of the vote counting machines being used in the special election.

NAMFREL observers are currently onsite in different voting centers across Cavite District 7. 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.

NAMFREL observers reported that in general, the conduct of the plebiscite has been smooth and peaceful, with most polling places opening on time, with election paraphernalia and members of the different Electoral Boards (EBs) complete in the polling places observed, and the members of the EBs well-trained.

Observers noted that the morning's activities are characterized by a low turnout of voters. Only about half of voting centers observed so far have voter assistance desks, and it took less than 5 minutes for voters to find their precinct number and sequence number. Observers also noted that only about half of voting centers observed so far have Emergency Accessible Polling Places (EAPPs) for senior citizens, the heavily pregnant, and people with disabilities, but most of the voting centers have express lanes for them. In one voting center in Trece Martires, a senior citizen had to be carried to her polling place. While there was a room inside the school identified to be the EAPP, the room was not set up to receive voters at the time of observation. In schools with EAPP, observers noted that they are spacious and well-ventilated. Observers also noted that some voting centers are too small and their hallways narrow, even if there are only a few polling places in them.

Inside the polling places, this morning's voting has been characterized by ballot paper jams. Almost a third of observations received so far mention ballot paper jam. In some polling places, paper jam occurred every time a ballot was inserted. Besides paper jam, observers also noted VCM malfunction or shutdown, and the voter verifiable paper audit trail or VVPAT not printing clearly. In Alulod Elementary School in Indang, voters were requested to leave their filled-out ballots after the VCM shut down. According to a NAMFREL observer there, voters were advised by COMELEC to leave their ballots as they secure a replacement SD card. The ballots will then be fed by the EB into the VCM upon replacement of the SD card. In a polling place in Trece Martires Elementary School, voters had to wait for their VCM to be replaced as the VVPAT coming out of the original VCM were unreadable.

NAMFREL observers also noted that there was a delay of up to 30 minutes in the start of voting in some polling places as the candidates' watchers arrived late. Voters took 2 to 5 minutes to cast their vote.

With regard to Covid-related protocols, 83% of reports received as of writing indicated that Covid-related protocols are not being consistently enforced and followed. The protocols that are not being strictly followed are the proper wearing of face masks, maintaining physical distancing, and disinfection of hands and materials. On average, ten voters were allowed to vote at any given time inside each polling place. While the majority of voting centers observed so far have Isolation Polling Places (IPPs), observers said that they did not see medical personnel in the majority of the voting centers.

NAMFREL will continue to gather observations throughout the day. Voting will end at 7pm, 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. ###