



NATIONAL CITIZENS' MOVEMENT FOR FREE ELECTIONS (NAMFREL)

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ELECTION STAKEHOLDERS CALL FOR A MORE TRANSPARENT, MORE CREDIBLE PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS



MANILA CITY - Over 90 representatives from civil society organizations, the academe, political parties, electoral reform advocates, and the media gathered to discuss how to enhance the Automated Election System (AES) for the 2025 National and Local Elections, and address other important matters related to the Philippine elections such as the transparency of the vote count, the credibility of the machines, campaign rules, and the compensation of teachers as poll workers.

The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) organized the NAMFREL Stakeholders' Forum on an Alternative Automated Election System, which was held on May 26, 2023, at The Manila Hotel.

What Really Matters



Mr. Angel Averia Jr., NAMFREL National Chairperson, said in his opening remarks that speed, accuracy, and reliability are the top strengths of the (current) AES while the top concerns are transparency, security, and high cost. NAMFREL highlighted the importance of transparency in the voting and counting processes, calling the attention of the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) in every election cycle.

“It’s speed vs transparency: What should we prioritize?” Mr. Averia asked during his opening remarks. *“To NAMFREL and (other) election stakeholders, it is transparency of the vote count.”*

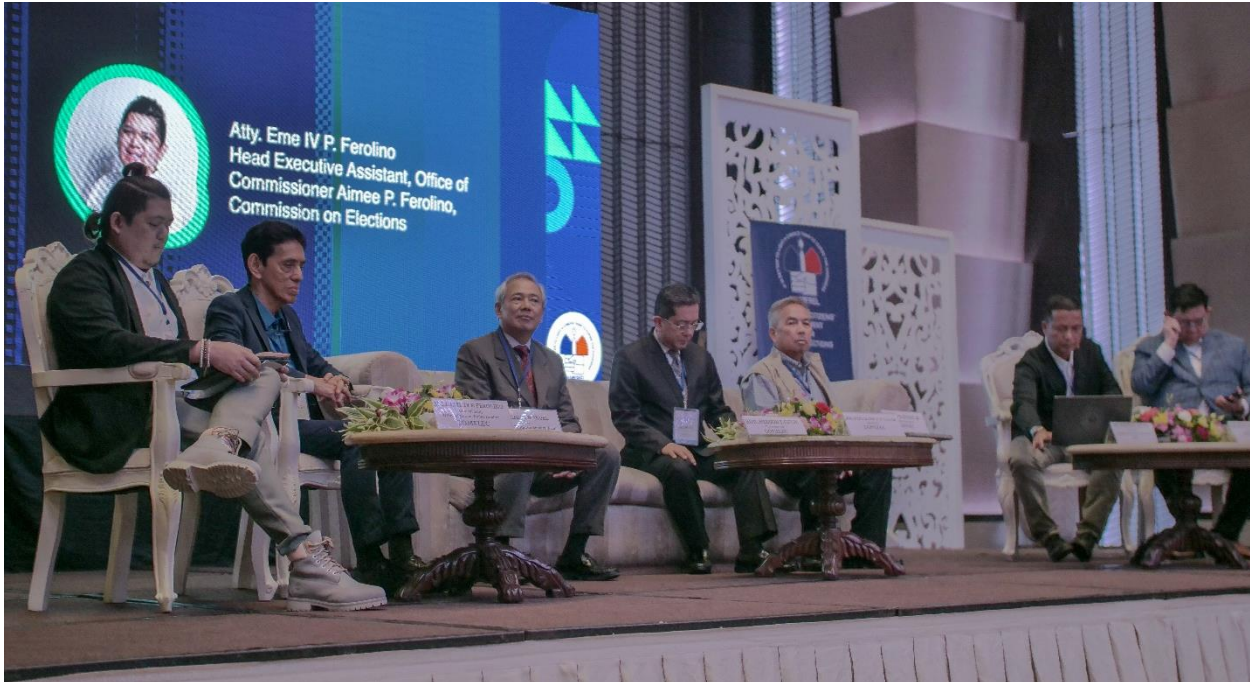
However, despite the call for transparency above speed, many election workers, particularly the electoral board members, do not want to go back to the lengthy counting process.

“But election workers, in particular the electoral boards, do not want a return to the painstaking task of (manually) counting votes at the voting precinct... which, based on NAMFREL’s records, could take anywhere between five hours to twelve hours”. Mr. Averia said.

The COMELEC, represented by Chairman George Erwin M. Garcia and Commissioner Nelson J. Celis, also shared their experience in the 2022 National and Local Elections, which they described as the most successful in the history of automated elections in the country.

“What did we learn from the 2022 experience? We learned that the COMELEC must always be transparent. The COMELEC must always listen to the stakeholders but more particularly, the clientele, the voters,” Chairman Garcia said in his remarks.

“The persistence by NAMFREL in this journey towards a fair election system is commendable. Despite the challenges and obstacles faced along the way, NAMFREL has remained steadfast in its pursuit of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity... Their unwavering commitment to progress and their relentless pursuit of fair and safe elections have set a shining example for us all,” Commissioner Celis remarked.



Addressing Issues of AES (Left to right) Atty. Eme IV P. Ferolino (COMELEC), Mr. Carlos C. Manuel (PCS), Commissioner Nelson Celis (COMELEC), Chairman George Garcia (COMELEC), National Chairperson Lito Averia (NAMFREL), Mr. Vladimer Quetua (ACT), Dr. Julio C. Teehankee (PARTICIPATE)

Atty. Eme IV P. Ferolino, Head Executive Assistant in the Office of Commissioner Ferolino (COMELEC), Mr. Carlos C. Manuel, Trustee of the Philippine Computer Society (PCS), Mr. Vladimer Quetua, National Chairperson of the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT), and Dr. Julio C. Teehankee, Chief of Party at PARTICIPATE, also joined as Reactors during the forum.

“We have to proclaim the winner as soon as possible kasi, kapag nade-delay ‘yung proclamation, there is a danger na maisip, ma-foresee ng tao na baka may ginagawa ‘yung election body, baka may dayaan. We have to declare the results right away kasi there is a danger na magkagulo and people may get hurt.” Atty. Dan Ferolino said, explaining the need for an automated election system.

“Education is the first line of defense. How do we know that they know? Unless we have a sense or a measure of assessment, we don’t exactly know na alam nila how to proceed with that one.” Mr. Carlos Manuel of Philippine Computer Society (PCS) said, calling for intensifying voter education on how the AES works and the proper appreciation of the AES from beginning to end.

“Election is not a foot race. It is bound by time. Hindi ‘yan karera. Importante is basically at this point of time, natapos mo ‘to. Importante po ‘yan simply because we’re going to make sure that actually the results are properly reflected as the way they are going to be represented.” Mr. Manuel added, addressing the proper presentation of the election results.

“Ang issue lang diyari (VCM) eh ‘yung mga nadi-discuss, hindi ‘yung machine - ‘yung transmission. ‘Yung transmission ang pinaka-crucial sa automated election system, hindi po ‘yung software o hardware. How sure are we na ‘yung mga pinadala sa bawat canvassing centers, ‘yun ‘yung results na galing sa presinto? How will we be able to verify the credibility, the integrity of these results?”, Chairman Garcia said, addressing that more than the machine itself, the transmission is most crucial in the process.

“Hindi tayo tutol sa anumang pagbabago lalo na sa usapin ng teknolohiya, pero ang teacher pa rin ang haharap do’n sa labas, sa proseso ng automated and that is election violence. Sana ma-proteksyunan pa rin ang mga teachers anumang pagbabago sa proseso, ito man ay mas maunlad na digital elections.” Mr. Vladimer Quetua of Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) said, addressing the challenges faced by teachers with regard to election-related violence.

“Sa karanasan namin no’ng 2022 sa aming report, 64% nito ay in errors. Ano ang resulta nito? Basically ay 24 hours na nagtatrabaho ang mga kaguruan.” Mr. Quetua added, addressing the issue of overworked teachers during elections. *“Pero kailangan pa din nating balansehin ‘yung usapin ng transparency, accountability, and credibility.”* Mr. Quetua further added.

“Perhaps, we should also look at one paradigm - the standard is to look at elections from the paradigm of risk assessment and management.” Dr. Julio Teehankee said, addressing the need for election risk assessment and management plan.

COMELEC Addresses Stakeholders' Concerns and Outlines Election Reforms



Different stakeholders rallying their concerns and recommendations to the election body

During the open forum, various stakeholders also highlighted concerns related to the electoral process. These discussions brought to light key issues such as overseas voters' ease of voting (internet voting), maximizing use of technology in elections, fair compensation for teachers working abroad, regulations governing pre-campaign activities and social media campaigns, revenue stream management by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), the participation of volunteers as members of the electoral board, public feedback on the Terms of Reference (TOR), setting realistic budget on election technologies and its procurement, and the need to

address challenges related to transmission of results. These matters were identified as critical areas requiring attention and resolution to ensure a transparent and efficient electoral system.

COMELEC responded to all concerns and recommendations raised, and assured its stakeholders that the Commission is fully dedicated to ensuring fair and credible elections, including its strong commitment to address stakeholders' concerns. COMELEC said they look forward to a collaborative effort with all relevant parties to strengthen the electoral process and maintain the integrity of our democratic system.

NAMFREL Proposes Standards for the Enhancement of the AES

NAMFREL presented during the Forum its proposed standards to improve the AES for the 2025 elections, based on two key principles: private voting and public counting. NAMFREL has been advocating for these standards since before the 2022 elections, and recently updated them based on the lessons from those elections. The following proposed standards have been submitted to COMELEC, Congress, and the COMELEC Advisory Council:

1. Open Source Licensing: Utilizing licenses like General Public License or Election Technology Public License (OSET-PL) to ensure that the software can be reviewed by everyone.
2. Election Markup Language (EML): Adopting EML without processing or conversion during transmission, as it contains valuable information for analyzing potential fraud.
3. Sequential numbering and random sorting: Implementing sequential numbers for all national positions and randomly sorting candidate names to maintain fairness and neutrality.
4. Digital Signature: Incorporating digital signatures throughout the process to provide secure authentication. Digital fingerprints can be added to the EML for additional security.
5. Voter Verified Ballot (VVB): Implementing VVB as a standard for printing ballots. VVB should be both human-readable and machine-readable using QR codes, enabling public counting of votes at the precinct level.

The proposed standards will enhance transparency in the AES while reducing technical complexities. By using readily available technology that is hardware and software neutral, without favoring any provider, data and transmission security can be significantly improved, while also reducing costs. Moreover, these standards would encourage greater stakeholder participation in the elections, if coupled with legal amendments such as opening procurement bidding to local providers by removing the requirement under Republic Act No. 9369 that “the system procured must have demonstrated capability and been successfully used in a prior electoral exercise here or abroad”.

NAMFREL is confident that the public is ready for technology, drawing from lessons learned in previous automated elections, as long as transparency is upheld. The value of the Voter Verified

Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) has been appreciated by the voters, despite the lack of provisions in the law on addressing discrepancies identified by them. Issues have been identified in procuring specialized hardware and materials, leading to instances of technology features being not used. In particular, failed biddings for the cables limited the use of personal digital signatures of the Electoral Board members in the 2022 elections. NAMFREL's proposed standards seek to address these identified issues within the current AES framework.

During the breakout session, participants were organized into groups based on their organizational nature. Each group was given a set of questions to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the Automated Election System (AES) and provide their recommendations.

Most of the groups widely acknowledged that the top strength of the current AES is its speed. However, most groups also expressed a shared concern regarding its lack of transparency, which they identified as its top disadvantage. Transparency, for most of the groups, is about the openness of the counting process which gives assurance to the voters that their votes are being counted correctly, and auditability of the results.



Members of the NAMFREL National Council and National Secretariat

The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) is a non-partisan and non-profit organization in the Philippines that aims to promote and uphold the principles of free, fair, and transparent elections. NAMFREL was established in 1983 and has been actively involved in monitoring and safeguarding the electoral process in the country. NAMFREL plays a significant role in promoting citizen participation and electoral transparency in the Philippines. ###