PRESS RELEASE
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COMELEC URGED TO HOLD RANDOM MANUAL AUDIT
TO ENSURE FAIRNESS OF 2010 ELECTIONS

NAMFREL maintains that a parallel random manual audit (RMA) of election returns is necessary to establish the credibility and transparency of the 2010 elections. As such, the electoral watchdog group urges the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to take all necessary steps to ensure that the RMA is implemented, including the preparation of General Instructions (GI) for the conduct of such an audit. The importance of conducting the RMA was underscored by the proceedings of a Roundtable Discussion on the Random Manual Audit, held recently at the University of the Philippines (UP) Alumni Building. It was convened by AES Watch and Center for People Empowerment in Governance (EU-CENPEG), with the participation of NAMFREL, the UP School of Statistics, Social Weather Station (SWS), and Pulse Asia, among other concerned groups.

During the discussion, participants spoke with Kathy Dopp, a US-based election mathematician, via web conference. She remarked that RMA is useful for establishing which ballots were not read or can't be read by the precinct-count optical scan (PCOS) machines. Furthermore, people's awareness of the RMA may potentially deter attempted electoral fraud.

NAMFREL also agrees with the Roundtable group's proposal that the RMA be conducted following the transmission of election returns to the four polling servers, but definitely prior to the proclamation of winners. The auditing process must also be conducted in public view, just like in manual election counts, open to observation by poll watchers and interested citizens.

At present, COMELEC is required to randomly select one precinct to be audited per district, under Republic Act 9369. NAMFREL maintains that such measures are insufficient to ensure fair and transparent elections. The organization proposes that more precincts should be audited via RMA under agreed General Instructions; the wider, the better. This was also the consensus during the Roundtable Discussion.

Financial constraint is not a valid reason for refusing to conduct the RMA, because Congress allotted 10 billion pesos of its 1.5 trillion peso 2010 budget for use by COMELEC in the 2010 elections. Furthermore, this amount is separate from the 11.2 billion pesos from the 2009 budget for poll automation.

It is crucial that citizens groups such as NAMFREL be actively involved in the random manual audit. The extent of the participation of election watchdog groups should be clearly specified in the GI, to avoid potential disputes and disagreements.

To this end, NAMFREL supports various recommendations on the conduct of the RMA, cited during the Roundtable Discussion. These include the following suggestions:

- The use of a stratified risk-based RANDOM sampling technique that considers political 'hot spots' or precincts deemed to be at higher risk. This may involve the assistance of the UP School of Statistics.

- A sample size that is statistically valid to enable extrapolation of the results to the population at a 95% or higher confidence level

- The precincts to be sampled should be selected just one to two hours prior to the end of voting 6 pm. This limits the risk of certain unscrupulous parties tampering only those PCOS machines that are not selected for the audit.

- The RMA shall be conducted by Board of Election Inspectors from another precinct. The procedures involved in conducting the RMA ought to be similar in practice to the tabulation from a manual election count.

- The RMA should be conducted right at the same precinct. This limits the risk of ballot boxes being exposed to snatching and/or tampering.

- Finally, the manual counting of ballots should be subject to the same criteria as those set for the PCOS machine (e.g., accept shading of 50% and reject those that are less). This allows the RMA to simply test the accuracy and reliability of the PCOS machines given the agreed precision levels.

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