ARMM election still uncertain

With less than three months to go, the holding of the scheduled election in the ARMM on August 8 is still uncertain. The senate is still in the process of holding consultations on whether it should be postponed or not, before the matter is presented to the bi-cam for deliberation. The lower House has earlier approved the bill postponing the election, and to have it synchronized with the May 2013 national and local elections. Should the senate decide to postpone, both versions of the postponement bill would have to be reconciled at the congressional bicameral conference committee before being approved again by both houses. Theoretically, Congress has up to June 9 to make a final decision, before they adjourn.
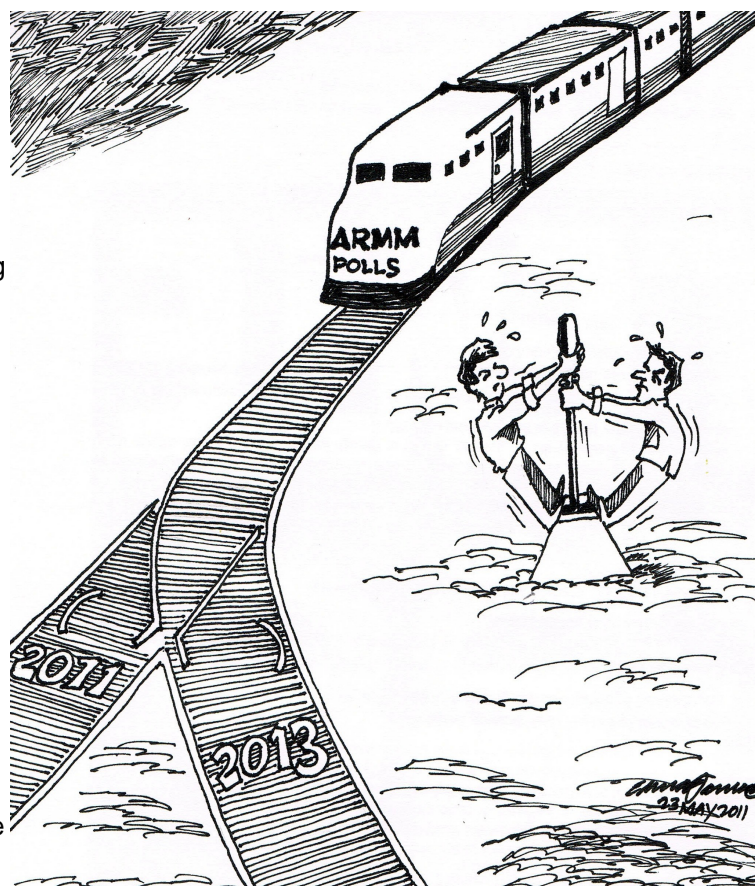
With the uncertainty of the holding of the election, the Comelec has said that it could not go full blast with the preparations. The Comelec has decided to automate the ARMM election using Smartmatic's PCOS machines. However, the Comelec said that with the holding of the election still unsure, it could not finalize its deal with Smartmatic. The Comelec is wary of having a repeat of what happened in the October 2010 barangay and sangguniang kabataan elections -- which lawmakers wanted to postpone but eventually pushed through -- resulting to hasty preparations of the Comelec, delay in the delivery of election paraphernalia, and postponement of the election in many areas.

However, it is not only the decision of Congress that the Comelec is focusing on. There are also pending cases before the Supreme Court seeking to both postpone and continue on with the ARMM election. The Comelec said that regardless of the decision of Congress, the justices could rule to postpone or not the polls.

The Comelec has already adjusted its Calendar of Activities regarding the ARMM election, "to afford more time to prepare and review the guidelines for the conduct of the elections.". The election period has been officially delayed by one month, now covering the period June 9, 2011 - September 7, 2011.

Last Thursday, the Senate Committee on Local Government held a consultation hearing in Marawi City, attended by Senators Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Miguel Zubiri, and Francis Escudero, who have all expressed before to the media their opinion that the election should push through. The hearing was criticized by civil society organizations in Mindanao who are in favor of postponement, saying that the hearing was "lutong makaw" (a done deal).

Despite the opposition to the postponement of aforementioned senators, including Vice President Jejomar Binay who said in an interview that synchronization of the elections is not a valid reason to postpone the scheduled

ARMM polls, some senators are said to be in favor of postponement, including Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile. Earlier last week, DILG Secretary Jesse Robredo joined in the call to postpone the ARMM election, repeating an earlier statement made by presidential spokesperson Edwin Lacierda that the ARMM was "a failed experiement." Former senator Aquilino Pimentel, Jr., the author of the ARMM Organic Act, said in an interview also last week that postponement of the election is not the solution to the "failed experiment" and that any failure in the autonomy in ARMM resulted from a "half-hearted implementation of the law that created the autonomous region." Pimentel also said that if Congress decides to postpone the election, "the Act would very likely be challenged before the Supreme Court for being an unconstitutional and illegal act."

Meanwhile, several individuals have already filed their certificates of candidacy (COCs) for ARMM governor and vice governor. For governor, the following have reportedly filed their candidacies already: Ephrain Defino, Alvarez Isnaji, Elsie Orejudos, Pangalian Balindong, Kadra Masihul, Pax Mangudadatu, and Ansaruddin Adiong. For vice governor: Sharifa Bago, Bashier Manalao, Sahiron Salim, and President Aquino's aunt Margarita "Tingting" Cojuangco. The Comelec has set the deadline for filing of COCs on May 25. (Various news sources)

Angeles City Election Protest

Within ten days after the May 10, 2010 elections, former Angeles City Mayor Francis Nepomuceno filed an electoral protest against Edgardo Pamintuan, who had just won the election with a final count of 60,5632 votes against Nepomuceno's 34,105 votes. In his protest, Nepomuceno alleged that Pamintuan's camp placed identifying marks and other unnecessary words and expressions in the ballots that caused the PCOS machines to count the votes in Pamintuan's favor. Nepomuceno also reportedly alleged that the machines were pre-programmed to count votes for Pamintuan.

However, Pamintuan countered that there is a possibility that it was Nepomuceno's camp who did the cheating. "They were still in power 46 days after the elections, meaning all the ballot boxes were in their custody. They were also the ones who identified the supposed questionable precincts -- the precincts which they may have tampered with," Pamintuan said. "The cheating happened after the elections and the cheating was against me." Pamintuan alleged that only ballots with Nepomuceno's name were not spoiled. Regarding the charge that the machines were pre-programmed in his favor, Pamintuan said that it is technically impossible and that the charge actually questions the entire automated elections.

187 precincts were identified by Nepomuceno in his protest. Early this month, the Comelec's second division commenced the opening of the ballot boxes in question. On May 16, the Comelec suspended the revision process after having only opened four ballot boxes, saying that there were massive discrepancies between the results in the automated election returns and the votes as reflected on the physical ballots. Comelec Second Division chair Lucenito Tagle has suggested checking on the election results reflected on the compact flash cards (CFCs) used by the PCOS machines as per revision rules, to which Nepomuceno's camp objected. Tagle cited discrepancies between the ballot images obtained from the CFCs and the original ballots which were transported from the city hall here to the Comelec central office for the recount. He cited reports from members of his division's committee on revision that ovals intended for mayoral vote on the ballots were shaded for more than one candidate for mayor, thus supposedly voiding the vote. Corresponding photo images of the ballots, however, showed no such over-voting. Tagle admitted that the tampered ballots examined so far did not seem to affect votes for Nepomuceno.

On May 20, Nepomuceno unexpectedly announced the withdawal of his petition against Pamintuan, citing lack of funds to continue with the protest. Pamintuan, however, said Nepomuceno's withdrawal of the case will not stop him from filing charges of electoral fraud and sabotage. He said they have evidence of massive tampering of the ballots after the elections in the precincts Nepomuceno's camp precisely pointed to as having questionable results. "These evidences reveal a sinister operation conducted while the ballots and ballot boxes were still in the custody of Nepomuceno before officially turning them over to me on June 30, 2010," Pamintuan said. (Sources: SunStar, PhilStar)

Filipino IT community to hold conference on automated election

The Automated Election System Watch (AES Watch) will be holding the first-ever nationwide conference on automated elections, on June 13, 2011 at the GT-Toyota Asian Cultural Center in UP Diliman. Entitled FILIPINO IT for Election (FIT4E), preparations are being spearheaded by conveners engaged in IT, science and technology, citizen's participation, and policy study and research.

"One year after the Philippines' first automated polls of May 2010, the quest for a reliable and secure election technology continues. This time, it should involve the participation of the country's IT community whose expertise and professionalism counts among the best in the world. The FILIPINO IT can create, innovate, and automate. AES Watch believes the FILIPINO can do it," a statement from the coalition posted on their website reads.

The Automated Election System Watch (AES Watch) is a broad, non-partisan, and independent citizens' watch group comprised of 40 organizations including the UP Alumni Association (UPAA), CBCP-Nassa, AMRSP, CenPEG, Philippine Computer Society Foundation, Computing Society of the Philippines (CSP), Transparentelections.org, MGG, NAMFREL, NCCP, computer science Deans and faculty of DLSU, Ateneo, and UP, PhiCert, Transparency International – Philippines, Association of Schools of Public Administration in the Philippines, Solidarity Philippines, and many others.

For more information, the FIT4E secretariat may be reached at tel. nos. 436.2217 / 920.2080 / 920.2036; email fit@ittc.up.edu.ph. Their office is at the UP Information Technology Training Center (UP ITTC), 2/F Vidal Tan Hall, Quirino Ave. cor. Velasquez St., University of the Philippines, Dilliman, Quezon City.