

Complete the Comelec en banc now

A month after Commissioners Nicodemo Ferrer and Gregorio Larrazabal retired from the Commission on Elections (Comelec), the Office of the President has yet to appoint their replacements. One wonders how the Commission could function effectively with an incomplete set of officers. The immediate appointment of new Comelec commissioners is crucial if the Comelec is to carry out its identified tasks of working to modernize the electoral process, not only the counting and consolidation of votes, but also the registration of voters. The Comelec is also now in the thick of preparing for several special elections starting this month, as well as the ARMM election scheduled for August.

In early January, civil society organizations including election watchdogs and members of the private sector submitted a shortlist of nominees to the Office of the President for consideration. The groups believe that the nominees are exceptionally fit to the criteria of independence, competence and integrity that Comelec commissioners should possess. Still, no commissioner has been appointed.

It is recommended that the President consider appointing commissioners who have expertise in administration and information technology, if the Comelec is to carry out needed reforms. The new commissioners, if appointed on time, will play crucial roles as election administrators and in the enforcement of laws and regulations in the conduct of upcoming activities, like the special elections in Cagayan, Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Sulu and Mountain Province this month.

As an independent election watchdog, we urge the President to appoint the new Comelec commissioners as soon as possible, to complete the Comelec en banc so that the commission can adequately carry out their immediate tasks. The Comelec will benefit greatly from the appointment of carefully chosen commissioners at this time.



Why the 2011 ARMM Elections should not be postponed

NAMFREL Position on the Proposed Postponement of the 2011 ARMM Elections

Notwithstanding our original position premised on HB 3542 (Balindong), NAMFREL still maintains its original position submitted to the Committee in January 2011 not to postpone the August 2011 ARMM elections and not to synchronize it with the May 2013 polls.

Despite the recently introduced bills (HB 4146 – 51 authors and HB 4062-Jaafar), while laudable and addresses

certain distortions that would arise if postponement is opted, we maintain our position for the following reasons:

- 1) Postponing the elections for the 8th time will not guarantee a free and fair elections. Proper preparation and implementation and a coordination with other stakeholders will. Contrary to common perception, the holding of the ARMM elections will not affect the peace process.
- 2) Real and inclusive consultations in the ARMM have not been conducted yet.
- 3) Postponement will go against the basic and internationally accepted principle of regularity of the elections
- 4) Postponement will deprive the ARMM voters of their right to choose their leaders for 2 1/2 years.
- 5) Resources is not a constraint to holding the ARMM elections. In previous Committee hearings, the Comelec even mentioned that they can use the 2010 savings of Php 1.8 billion to supplement the budget to conduct the ARMM polls. This is on top of the House appropriation of Php 200 million for the 2011 ARMM elections. Comelec as well as its deputized law enforcement agencies have reiterated that it is prepared and have initiated activities in preparation for the forthcoming ARMM elections.
- 6) Unresolved and unsettled legal concerns and questions on:
 - Term limits (Article 10, Section 8 of Constitution)
 - Constitutionality
 - Inconsistency with the Organic Act (RA 9054)
 - SC Ruling on Osmena vs. Comelec in 1991 (GR 1008), RA 5066
- 7) Synchronization of the ARMM elections on 2013 will dissipate the resources of the Comelec and law enforcement agencies to conduct and manage the May 2013 mid-term elections and the proposed ARMM elections.
- 8) Postponement might create a political vacuum (if not adequately addressed by HB 4062). Hold-overs or political appointment if not done properly might create an "uneven playing field" or distortion in the political landscape when the appointee/ OICs/hold-overs will use state resources for political campaigning and perpetuate themselves in public office. With the "gaming" climate prevailing in our electoral process, what is needed is to change the rules of the game and not be participants to the "game".
- 9) There is still enough time to bid out appropriate technology for automating the ARMM elections. (Note: In the preparations for the previous ARMM elections, the choice of technology was decided on at the end of March 2008. The bidding of the four technologies was done in time for the automation of the August 2008 ARMM elections.)
- 10) Having elections this August will ensure continuity of a functioning local government in the ARMM to avoid disruptions in the delivery of basic services and administration of local governance.
- 11) Postponement is not a solution to conduct a successful ARMM elections but what is more important is the metrics and clear goals in which Comelec would successfully prepare and administer for.
- 12) Intervening in a so called "failed state" and breaking up the "command vote" voting practice might yield short term gains but would result in some protracted and perennial long-term problems (eg. Undermining the institutions & its institutional processes, a new set of political armed groups would be formed and arise from leaders without mandates or legitimacy).

Integrity pledge signed

Namfrel was witness to the signing of an Integrity Pledge initiated by the Department of Education (DepEd) through its Secretary, Bro. Armin Luistro. The pact was signed on February 22, 2011 by the DepEd with its suppliers, business partners and civil society groups as a concrete step to address corruption both in government and private sector and set up mechanisms to operate business ethically and with integrity.

Along with Namfrel, other organizations that witnessed the signing and who also affixed their signatures are representatives from the Ateneo School of Government (G-Watch), Procurement Watch, Inc., (PWI), the Boy Scouts of the Philippines (BSP), National Confederation of PTCA/Parents Teachers Association and Federations, and the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA- EAP).

Luistro said that while government has its own initiatives to address corruption, those steps cannot succeed

without individual and collective commitment from private businesses that deal with government.

"First we must acknowledge that corruption erodes the moral fiber and impedes economic growth. Second, we must act responsibly by leading by example, thus, this integrity pledge which binds DepEd and the business groups to always observe ethical business practices and good corporate governance," said Luistro.

PEOPLE POWER 25

The spirit that spurred a revolution

by Jayson Villa Sabdilon (Basilan / Zamboanga)

This year marks the 25th anniversary when the people of the Philippines helped changed forever what a political revolution meant. In the days leading to the snap elections of 1986, I was one of the many innocent elementary school children caught in the very heated campaigns between the Marcos and Aquino camps. In Zamboanga and Basilan, our young minds sensed the tense mood in school and in our communities... Our teachers constantly whispering to each other during class breaks, parents and older relatives huddled together and ears close to the transistor radios and occasional television clips, and very quiet streets in the evenings, the silence violated only by occasional roaring of speeding military trucks... A few more days later, the great news came in: Marcos Flees! A plain housewife was then thrust into becoming President of the Philippines. Television footages and radio clips of the EDSA bloodless uprising dominated the news for months. We made it on the world news!

Fast forward to a few years after the famous EDSA revolution, I started to wonder: Was EDSA really just a Manila-based phenomenon as many people started to suggest? And then I remember... One night in those tense-filled times, I overheard my parents discussing politics. My mom, a rural school teacher decided to side with the "yellow force" and my father on the other hand, an enlisted personnel of the armed forces, was visibly loyal to the "red force". I remember their arguments to be passionate, and their campaigns loud and strong! Days leading into the election, one uncle of mine, Bonifacio, who lived next to us, came home tired. As a manual laborer, I assumed he came from work. Over dinner, I heard him telling my father and mother about having been recruited for NAMFREL, a newly formed volunteer group in Zamboanga which found its way to Isabela in Basilan. Both my parents dissuaded him from continuing, fearing for his safety. They said he and his kind can become targets of the blind and unruly supporters from both camps. My uncle, a silent man, simply explained that with all the noise created by both camps, he felt it would be better for him to stay in the middle and "oversee" what is going to happen. As the election drew near, he said that more volunteers showed up...and more importantly, the red and yellow camps suddenly became aware of their presence. They became small and mixed bunch of old people, young professionals and ordinary citizens wearing armbands made of rice sacks printed with "Bantay ng Bayan" letterings. Yes they were small in number but they were a determined lot. I saw them bringing their own water bottles and packed "baon" to the precincts while the watchers of political candidates were served catered foods. They walked to their precincts while the watchers were ferried in motorcycles, jeeps and trucks. "Kawawa naman" I thought... When the news of the revolution broke out and freedom was restored, I again listened to what the family elders had to say. My mother was very happy that Cory won. My father was cautious about commenting. However, it was the silent but proud smile of my uncle that puzzled me. Sensing my confusion, he told me then "Nalipay lang ko kay nakatabang ko sa pagbantay..." ("I am happy since I was able to help in the watch.") I did not understand it then.



The years that followed saw the Philippines rising and falling in the hands of the very characters that figured in EDSA 1. Loyalties changed, issues blurred, candidates jumped ships and elections were regularly held like a burning strike of lightning every other three years. Throughout these years, I sincerely believe that one thing remained unchanged: the NAMFREL spirit.

Attacked and accused of favoritism and partisanship many times over, the NAMFREL organization stayed upright. I think it is primarily because the real NAMFREL strength did not rest in its famous founders, animated

characters and many leaders. It rested on the spirit of the volunteers. It rested on the inner faith and motivation to continue "lighting a candle instead of cursing the darkness". It rested on the firm stand that we will side with what is true and right.

Many people believe that EDSA happened because of Cory...or Ninoy, or Cardinal Sin, or Fidel Ramos or Enrile or even of Marcos. I believe the EDSA miracle was made possible because of the many ordinary Filipino people who decided to speak up. I believe the many unnamed NAMFREL volunteers throughout the country was part of that miracle. True, the stretch of EDSA and its purported heroes shone brightly all over the world 25 years ago... They were only able to do so because they were thrust high upward by those whose spirits wanted to see this country free. Among these spirits were the many volunteers who safeguarded the people's voice... Among these were the people all over the Philippines who donned a candle-logo on their vests made from sacks of flour. Among these spirits is the NAMFREL spirit. 25 years after the first EDSA revolution, the NAMFREL Bantay ng Bayan spirit lives on. And this is what I ultimately believe the real EDSA is all about.

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