Asian Network for Free Elections

Statement on the 2019 National and Local Elections of the Philippines

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The **Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)** congratulates the people of Philippines for the generally peaceful elections and their continued participation in exercising their universal rights last May 13, 2019. The voter turnout was encouraging and will surely be within the 78 % average turn out rate in the last three elections. Furthermore, we would like to congratulate the Commission on Election (Comelec), the military and police personnel who managed the security, the teachers who administered polling precincts, government officials who were deputized for election duty, the civil society groups, and the media. Such interaction among these bodies ought to be nurtured and is something that other Asian states should emulate.

The overall election day process generally went well albeit attended by delays and concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the automated election system. The Philippines is one of the few countries in Asia which utilize machines throughout the electoral process, from the registration of voters up until vote tabulation at the national level.

There were around 86,000 votes counting machines (VCM) which were deployed throughout the country. Every VCM was fitted with a memory card which stored all election data including the election results. According to the Comelec, around 961 VCMs malfunctioned during election day, and 1,165 memory cards were found to be defective and had to be replaced. These technical problems caused delays in the voting process, prompting voters to queue for up to 4 hours. Election stakeholders recommend that a thorough diagnosis should be done prior to the elections to ensure that all machines are working properly.

Other concerns raised by officials whom ANFREL met during its engagement were the delays in the transmission of results to the Transparency Server handled by the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), an ANFREL member and

accredited citizens' arm in the 2019 Elections. The Transparency Server is an important component of the automated election system (AES); it receives and shows to the public partial and unofficial tally of the Election Returns while the official count by the National Board of Canvassers will come later. The Transparency Server initially received 0.4% of the results at around 6 pm on election day but failed to update until 2 am the next day[1], which alarmed various groups. While the cause of the glitch has been identified by the Comelec, the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), another ANFREL member, recommends that a thorough examination of the transmission data logs should be conducted by the Comelec and be made open to the public.

Aside from these technical issues, various election monitoring organizations also observed the rise of vote buying specially at the local contests, provinces and municipalities. According to various sources, such behavior is a result of politicians trying to influence voter selection since the system is harder to rig. Media reports point out to a campaign environment tilted towards traditional political dynasties and those with financial resources. Investigative reports of media revealed that some candidates spent more than the allowable budget per candidate[2]. The COMELEC should ensure that campaign finance regulations are implemented to level the playing field.

Other issues raised by the various groups include lax implementation of voter secrecy during voting and feeding of ballots to the VCM, numerous uncontested seats in the local positions, and violence and intimidation in several provinces in Mindanao. ANFREL calls on the local stakeholders to collaboratively address these issues in preparation for the 2022 Presidential Elections.

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[1] https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2019/230626-comparison-philippine-election-results-transmission
[2] https://pcij.org/stories/p2-4-b-pre-campaign-ads-bong-go-marcos-roxas-roque-top-spenders/