



NATIONAL CITIZENS' MOVEMENT FOR FREE ELECTIONS (NAMFREL)

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PRESS RELEASE

NAMFREL Bantay ng Bayan UPDATE #1
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NAMFREL releases preliminary observations on the 2022 Maguindanao Plebiscite

The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) released its preliminary observations on the conduct of the September 17, 2022 Maguindanao Plebiscite, as observed by its volunteers who are currently onsite in different voting centers across the province. NAMFREL was accredited by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) as citizens' arm for the plebiscite, and it deployed more than a hundred volunteers observing in voting centers in the different municipalities of Maguindanao. The preliminary observations cover the opening procedures as well as the first few hours of voting, including arrangements inside the voting centers. Observations are being sent in by authorized NAMFREL observers electronically and through paper forms.

NAMFREL volunteers reported that in general, the conduct of the plebiscite has been smooth and peaceful, with most polling places opening on time, and with election paraphernalia and members of the different Plebiscite Committees (PlebCom) complete in most polling places observed. As of writing, NAMFREL volunteers have described the plebiscite as smooth, organized, and peaceful, with no untoward incidents observed.

The morning's activities are characterized by a very low turnout of voters. However, in a voting center in Talitay municipality, the NAMFREL team deployed there said that about 80% of registered voters had already voted when they arrived. The school principal said people voted early because many of the voters there are farmers. A volunteer deployed in a voting center in Talayan municipality was also informed that 80% of registered voters there had already voted.

Security remains an issue in many parts of Maguindanao. In Talitay, the NAMFREL team reported that they were informed that some voters stayed home because they do not feel safe enough to go out and vote. However, the principal at a voting center there remarked that the plebiscite has been very peaceful compared to regular elections, which the principal said are characterized by security-related incidents.

Inside voting centers and polling places, NAMFREL volunteers reported that it took voters 5 to 10 minutes to get their precinct numbers and sequence numbers from the voter assistance desks, and less than 10 minutes on average to go through the voting process, with many observers also reporting that voters took less than 5 minutes to vote. Most observers noted that in general, secrecy of the vote was maintained inside polling places. However, in a polling place in Datu Odin Sinsuat, a NAMFREL volunteer

noted that a voter took a photo of his filled-out ballot, but he was not reprimanded by the PlebCom.

NAMFREL volunteers also noted that during voting, the ballot box in some polling places was open, or fastened with just a plastic seal.

With regard to Covid-related protocols, NAMFREL volunteers reported that on average, only 10 voters were allowed inside a polling place at any given time. Prior to the cut-off time for the writing of this report, only 55.6% of NAMFREL volunteers who have reported said that Covid-related protocols were being consistently enforced and followed. The protocols that were not being strictly enforced are the prescribed 1-meter physical distancing, and the proper wearing of face masks. Only 50% of observations so far indicated that there is an Isolation Polling Place (IPP) in the voting center, while only 75% indicated the presence of medical personnel.

Less than 60% of observations noted the existence of an Emergency Accessible Polling Place (EAPP) inside the voting center, and 75% of received reports so far said that EAPPs are being used by voters. Only 58.3% of received reports so far said that there are express lanes for senior citizens, PWDs, and the pregnant. Only 50% said that there is a Voter Assistance Desk (VAD) in the voting center.

In the run-up to today's plebiscite, NAMFREL municipal coordinators reported that there were few meetings held in the province to inform people about the plebiscite. They were mostly initiated by barangay officials and community leaders under the direction of the mayors, encouraging people to vote YES for the division of the province. Provincial officials were reported to be pushing for a YES vote, and there were also tarpaulins placed along major roads encouraging people to do so. The NAMFREL coordinators also noted that there was very little or no information available on the impact of the YES or NO vote.

NAMFREL will continue to gather observations throughout the day. Voting will end at 3pm, and counting and canvassing of votes will commence after that. NAMFREL will be submitting a report to the COMELEC on the findings of the observation, identifying areas that could be further strengthened, and recommending measures to help ensure the conduct of safer and more efficient electoral exercises. ###