

## MIDTERM ELECTIONS IN BARMM 2025

# OBSERVATIONS OF THE INDEPENDENT ELECTION MONITORING CENTER (IEMC) for BARMM and Sulu

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### **ACKNOWLEDGING WINS**

#### **1. Due consideration for vulnerable sectors**

The special voting window for Senior citizens, pregnant women, and PWDs from 5:00 AM to 7:00 AM was highly appreciated. This window was implemented mostly in cities and centers, and less in the peripheries, where delays in the opening of polling precincts were observed. However, throughout the day, the vulnerable voters were given priority in queuing and voting.

#### **2. Diligence of COMELEC and poll workers**

COMELEC and poll workers showed devotion in administering the elections amidst security, administrative and technological challenges. The COMELEC officials were cooperative with election monitoring teams. Their cooperation though is hampered by overconcentration of tasks that require their immediate and preferential attention.

#### **3. Conflict between state forces and the MILF and MNLF was controlled on election day**

The Memorandum of Understanding between the MILF/BIAF and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GPH) on the ceasefire protocols during elections was, in general, maintained and enforced.

#### **4. People bravely cast their votes despite intimidation and pressure**

The incidents, including brawls and attempts to destroy automated counting, appear to be a coordinated campaign to disrupt voting. Yet, communities persisted. At day's end, all the coercion, intimidation, and militarization from both state and non-state actors, plus the logistical attacks against free and fair elections, were not enough to stop people from voting.

## **CHALLENGES**

### **1. Vote Buying and Selling**

As in the past elections, vote buying and selling and use of flying voters were a regular fixture in the 2025 midterm elections. The following are some incidents noted:

#### **Maguindanao del Sur;**

- Talitay - A man was caught by the military, having in possession coupons, allegedly for the distribution of *ayuda* (on election day).
- Buluan - A group of men was apprehended by military authorities not only for carrying deadly weapons, but also for attempting to usher in more than 50 men, alleged to be flying voters.

#### **Maguindanao del Norte;**

- Parang - Voters received claim stubs which can be converted to Php5,000 after casting their votes.

#### **Tawi-Tawi;**

- Bongao - Voters proceeded to a tent where their IDs were stamped, indicating that they had voted straight a political party, in exchange for *ayuda*.

#### **Lanao del Sur;**

- Bayang, Maliwanag - A group of individuals, alleged flying voters, attempted to cast votes.

The problem of money politics leads to the proliferation of disinformation, particularly in social media. The culture of trolling has been rampant, particularly in Maguindanao del Norte. Examples are:

- Fake news over social media that Datu Toca Mastura has withdrawn from his candidacy as Governor of Maguindanao del Norte.

- Fake news over social media that Teng Mangudadatu, Mastura's rival, died of a stroke ahead of elections.

## **2. Fear Politics**

Loose firearms and organized armed groups enabled many accounts of unrest and intimidation of voters and poll watchers even before election day. Even when unarmed, mob groups instilled fear by intimidating and harassing voters and poll workers. The following are some of these incidents:

### **Maguindanao del Sur;**

- Datu Abdullah Sangki - Sighting of a group of armed men on May 11, 2025, who immediately fled the area upon the arrival of the 601st Infantry Brigade, who recovered high-powered firearms and ammunition on the reported site.
- Datu Unsay - An M79 40MM projectile was thrown by an unknown suspect at the municipal grounds. The Incident reported no explosion and no casualties.
- Buluan - Harassment by a group of armed men, who allegedly fired from a Hilux vehicle early this morning, created unrest, causing a delay in polling activities.
- Shariff Saydona Mustapha - As of 2:45PM, some men got into a fistfight while waiting in line at a polling precinct in Shariff Saydona Mustapha.
- South Upi - Many Teduray-Lambangian NMIPs abstained from voting, choosing safety over suffrage after days of firefights between UBJP and rival party supporters.
- South Upi – Teduray-Lambangian Non-Moro Indigenous peoples (NMIP) reside, voting still went smoothly despite a firefight between supporters of rival political parties last May 10 evening. Some were members of MNLF and MILF.

- South Upi - Around 1PM in Brgy. Romongaob (Poblacion), where NMIPs reside, tensions rose, and strangling happened between supporters of UBJP and their rival party.
- Several Teduray-Lambangian NMIPs who were residing near Cotabato-GenSan highway chose not to vote and stay in their houses due to violence in their vicinity.
- Ampatuan - Between 3:00-3:30 PM, firefighting was reported in Brgy. Dicalongan in Ampatuan. BEIs and voters had to evacuate from Datu Sangki Elementary School. Authorities are still investigating the incident.
- Guindulungan - As of 3:11PM, tensions ran high as fistfights between the mayoral candidate and incumbent mayor and their supporters were reported in Tambunan Central Elementary School. Police and military forces intervened to break up the incident. Voting resumed at the polling center after 30 minutes.
- Shariff Aguak - As of 3:11 PM, some residents were allegedly unable to vote as some poll watchers of a certain candidate voted on their behalf and pressured them to sign their ballots.
- Pandag - As of 4:20 PM, armed supporters of a mayoral candidate barged into precincts at Lower Dilag, held teachers and poll watchers at gunpoint, and poured water all over the ACMs. Authorities are still investigating the incident.

**Maguindanao del Norte:**

- Datu Odin Sinsuat - Sighting of armed men at Kusiong, DOS, leading to pre-emptive evacuation of the residents, on the eve of election day.
- Matanog - Precincts briefly shut down over violent clashes; elsewhere, the presence of armed men in uniforms and

makeshift checkpoints intimidated voters and poll workers alike.

- Barira - A fistfight occurred in Brgy. Lipawan between members of rival groups Agila and UBJP, due to alleged flying voters. Police and marine forces intervened on-site to de-escalate the situation. A medical team also responded to treat the injuries of those involved.

**Cotabato City:**

- Tamontaka-3 - The PNP arrested 7 individuals, who fired indiscriminately on the eve of election day.
- RH-10 - Successive gunshots were heard in the area, around 10:45 PM eve of election day. The incident resulted in injuries to one police officer from the CMFC and one civilian.
- RH-5 - A riot involving more than 40 men was reported around the vicinity of Don E. Sero Elementary School, which is a polling center. The PNP arrested a group of men who rallied on the streets while carrying metal bats, scaring the community. One was seriously injured.

**Basilan:**

- Isabela City - A teacher and her spouse were shot on May 11, 2025, in Sumagdang, Isabela City. The teacher was set to serve as BEI Chairman for Lantawan City, BARMM.

**Special Geographic Area:**

- Nabalawag - A strafing incident was reported involving the house of Datu Renz Tukuran early morning of May 12, 2025. Tukuran is running for mayor of Nabalawag Proper, Nabalawag, SGA. The incident injured one individual.
- Tugunan - As of 2:30 PM, gunshot sounds were heard outside Macasendeg Elementary School in the municipality of Tugunan.

- Nabalawag – As of 2:33 PM, a brawl was reported at the municipality of Nabalawag.
- Pahamuddin – At around 6:30 PM, a brawl between rival parties was reported upon the closing of polls in Brgy. Balakayon, Pahamuddin.

**Sulu:**

- Tapul - Fist fighting between supporters of mayoralty candidates of the island municipality of Tapul occurred around 10:00 AM this morning in one of the polling precincts.
- As of 4:27 PM on election day, brawling incidents are reported in four different polling precincts involving supporters of both mayoral candidates from the municipality of Parang, Sulu: Akuk Sangkula Central Elementary School, Alu Layag Elementary School, Parang National High School, and Saldang Elementary School.

### **3. Weak Command and Control Mechanism**

A central command authority like Provincial/municipal Election Monitoring Action Centers, a composite team of COMELEC, AFP, PNP, and Monitors is absent in most provinces in the BARMM, except Tawi-Tawi. There is confusion as to where complaints and observations by citizens and monitors can be submitted. Election officers are unavailable to respond to queries. Units of the AFP and PNP have their own Quick Response Teams (QRTs) but were apparently stand-alone units with weak linkages with Comelec and other law-enforcement agencies. Breakdown of information is observed in dealing with critical issues such as the following incidents:

- We note, in particular, the delay in the opening of voting in the Comelec-controlled municipality of Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao del Norte, where a mob led by a candidate for Vice Mayor stopped the delivery of election paraphernalia. DOS is under COMELEC control, and we wonder how and why the mob has succeeded in delaying the opening of the polling centers by half a day. Tension heightened at around 8:00 AM on election day, when the transport of ballots was

disrupted by barricading UBJP supporters. The UBJP supporters led by the UBJP Vice-mayorality candidate Bobsteel Sinsuat demanded that PNP personnel serve as BEIs, instead of teachers.

- In Tenorio Elementary School at Datu Odin Sinsuat, voters were trapped at Tenorio Elementary School due to a confrontation between supporters of two political parties. Tension heightened when around 100 armed men surrounded the school and hurled unidentified objects onto the roofs of the school buildings. The armed men managed to escape military pursuit.

#### **4. Challenges faced by Media and citizen watchdogs**

Recognized election monitors, even media people, were either driven away or not allowed to enter polling centers.

- Bagua-2, Cotabato City – At 11:00 AM on May 12, 2025, NAMFREL volunteers were prevented by assigned AFP and PNP personnel from entering the Datu Usman Elementary School polling center.
- Collectively, these incidents were observed in polling centers in Basilan, Cotabato City, Maguindanao del Norte, and Maguindanao del Sur.

#### **5. Connectivity gaps, particularly in the island provinces**

It took time to resolve glitches in the ACMs/VCMs in Tawi-Tawi due to weak internet connection and telecommunications, delaying the polling processes. In general, there was a difficulty in channeling information from the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi.

##### **Tawi-Tawi:**

- Bongao - Precincts opened before 5:00 AM and started to accommodate voters. However, some machines

malfunctioned due to battery problems. Communicating with NTSC was challenging; the response was late, causing the delay in feeding the ballots. Immediate concerns were acted upon by the assigned DESU.

**IEMC Proposes the following Action Points for future election in the BARMM:**

1. PRO-ACTIVE AND PREVENTIVE measures to interdict movements of unauthorized armed groups by strictly and uniformly enforcing the gun ban. The PNP and the AFP must accost and disarm armed elements in static and mobile checkpoints while intensifying visibility patrols.
2. CEASEFIRE MECHANISMS MUST BE PRO-ACTIVE in REGULATING the movements of Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) limited only in voting when UNARMED and OUT OF UNIFORM in accordance with the *“Guidelines for Mutual Understanding between the coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities and Ad-Hoc Joint Action Group of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for Ceasefire-Related Functions during the May 12, 2025 National and Local Elections”*. Movements before, during, and after elections of the BIAF must be coordinated earlier with the GPH-CCCH and GPH AHJAG. Intensified coordination must be done by the GPH CCCH and GPH AHJAG to prevent undue entanglement of the BIAF with PNP, AFP, and other armed groups that may disrupt the elections.
3. The COMELEC, PNP, and AFP must proactively accost individuals and disband groups who are not voters or authorized, whose presence and conduct in and around the polling centers are creating a climate of fear and intimidation to the voters in exercising their right of suffrage.
4. There is a need to develop reforms in the rules to counter the dominance of money and fear politics that subvert the will of the electorate.
5. Activation of a central authority for swift decisions and information sharing during elections. There should be a composite team of COMELEC, AFP, PNP and election monitors, especially in the coming BARMM elections to facilitate traffic of inquiries and complaints needing immediate response, inquiries, and for verification purposes.



6. Clear policies, guidelines, and information on the meaning and implications when an area is placed under COMELEC control, as in COMELEC Resolution 11135, s. 2025.
7. Establish voting arrangements for voters displaced by calamities and violence.
8. Review the implementation of the special voter registration and special voting precincts for Indigenous Peoples (Art. XI, COMELEC Resolution 11076) during the recent midterm elections.
9. Proactive crowd control measures to prevent yet another mob rule, posing a chilling effect on voters. Crowd control policies that limit the assembling of people within a perimeter outside of the polling center, or deploying a riot squad or an intensified Crowd Dispersal Control Unit, and intensifying visibility patrols are key examples.
10. Massive information campaign of COMELEC's polling rules and policies. Local executives should be well aware of what they can and cannot do, specifying sanctions for violation thereof.
11. To address intimidation and harassment toward media and monitors, deputized security officers should be fully aware of the protocol for allowing entry and the presence of media and monitors in polling centers.
12. Prohibit election-related social media postings and appearances by candidates themselves on the election day. These may be considered forms of illegal campaigning because they can still influence voters in many ways.
13. Activate monitoring action centers in the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, centralized with COMELEC, and equipped with improved telecommunications services, to provide fast and verified information.

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