



RESTORE FAITH IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS: AN OPEN LETTER TO COMELEC

Can the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) ensure that the coming elections will be credible and truthful? We hope so. As educators and Filipino citizens, however, we wish to make public our grave concerns regarding COMELEC's less-than-sterling performance, thus far, in the preparations leading to the May 2010 elections. As Christian educators and Filipino citizens, we the De La Salle Brothers of the Philippines regard the promotion of truth, justice and the common good as integral to our educational ministry in the country. If we choose to speak at this time, it is because we see the common good threatened by COMELEC's seeming ineptitude.

Over the past year, despite concerns, fears, and legitimate criticisms raised by the Joint Congressional Oversight Committee (JCOC), the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP), the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), the University of the Philippines' National College of Public Administration and Governance (NCPAG), the Automated Election System Watch 2010 (AES Watch), the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), the Washington-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and other credible bodies, the COMELEC has failed to put in place the needed safeguards to ensure the credibility of the upcoming political exercise. This is why, impelled by our individual and collective consciences, we have deemed it urgent to call attention to the negligence, unintended or otherwise, that puts this most basic and sacred of political rights—the right to suffrage—in grave danger.

Recent events have put into question the credibility of the election process. In particular, we are deeply concerned about the following:

1. the disabling of vital security safeguards of the Precinct Count Optical Scan (PCOS) machine to assure the proper counting and verification of ballots;
2. the negation of the digital signature facility as stated in Resolution No. 8786 section 40-g;
3. the apparent lack of transparency regarding the inventory of the PCOS machines, survey of the telecoms service, electrical power availability survey, and the clustering of precincts;
4. the high possibility of voter disenfranchisement due to the clustering of precincts, the inadequacy of voters' education activities, and the failure of the COMELEC to truly conduct an end-to-end simulation of the automated election process;
5. the absence of clear guidelines on the conduct of the random manual audit (RMA) and the execution of manual election as part of the continuity plan; and,
6. the absence of an officially publicized mechanism for settling and addressing the complex nature of electoral protests.

In the present set-up, there seems to be no clear way of verifying whether the votes cast are the actual votes counted and transmitted or indeed of even verifying the authenticity of a ballot. This violates COMELEC's own guidelines as well as the omnibus election code and opens the door to the possibility of massive

fraud. COMELEC's inability to fulfill this most basic requirement amounts to a dereliction of its solemn duty to the voting public and to the nation as a whole.

We call on COMELEC to redeem its credibility and the credibility of the election process by doing the following:

1. Restore all the built-in security safeguards and use the digital signature facility of the PCOS machines so as to ensure the proper verification of votes cast and counted in time.
2. Make known and explain to the public the process by which electoral protests and issues of disenfranchisement are to be handled and adjudicated fairly on the basis of evidence.
3. Make available the inventory and deployment of the PCOS machines allowing independent inspectors to account and verify these activities.
4. Publish the list of voters and their respective precincts two to three weeks before May 10 so as to minimize election day confusion.
5. Immediately release guidelines for the random manual audit (RMA) and comply with the best practices of RMA.
6. Create a system by which disenfranchised voters can register their complaints in an official record.

All of these safeguards are worthy of attention and are considered critical to the success of the May 2010 elections. Should COMELEC neglect these safeguards, we will be forced to conclude that COMELEC's commitment to clean elections is a sham.

In the elections of 1986, Filipinos proved that they could work together to protect the ballot in the face of seemingly unassailable odds. In particular, the heroism of the IT professionals who acted on their conscience and walked out of the Philippine International Convention Center (PICC) rather than participate in massive fraud and cheating, is a shining example of the kind of integrity and concern for the common good that is extremely needed today. In choosing to heed their consciences, these men and women were bowing to a higher call—that of One who reminds us that "We must obey God rather than human authority" (Acts 5:9).

In these days, it behooves us to remind all people of goodwill that the change we want to see in this country we love will not come about unless we heed the call of God in our consciences, the call to place duty to God and the needs of the country above personal security and self-interest. Such obedience demands that men and women of goodwill ACT NOW to ensure that the May elections will be conducted with probity, transparency, and accountability. We call on like-minded individuals and groups to support efforts to ensure that the May elections will be clean and honest.

While we take no pleasure in drawing attention to COMELEC's shoddy stewardship of the pre-election process, we would have no peace of mind if we allowed the common good to suffer because we chose to keep silent. We urge all who want clean elections in May to exercise their responsibility as citizens and demand more of those who purport to serve the public interest.

April 7, 2010
Feast of St. John Baptist de La Salle

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