



September 20, 2009

Melo “doomsayer” or telling the truth?

CenPEG foresees power and transmission failures in May 2010

Has the Comelec chairman joined the ranks of “doomsayers” by saying that the election body will resort to manual system in “30 to 50 percent” of polling precincts that will be hit by power failures in May 2010?

Prof. Bobby Tuazon, Director for Policy Studies of the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), asked this today following Comelec Chairman Jose Melo's recent admission that the poll body will use manual system in “30 to 50 percent of areas that are prone to power failures and network transmission issues.”

By his admission, the Comelec chairman might as well belong to “doomsayers” or “fearmongerers” – terms used by Comelec officials referring to critics who are asking the poll body to plug in loopholes to its automated election system (AES). Failure to install safeguards and safety measures will invite internal rigging and even a failure of elections, the critics said.

The UP-based CenPEG has revealed in its latest study 30 vulnerabilities of the AES including the absence of implementing rules and regulations (IRRs), voter's verification features, possible power, transmission problems and source code review, among others. Until now, Comelec has not released the source code for review by CenPEG and other interested parties despite the fact that a request had been approved on June 16.

With regard to the possible power failures, Comelec should have known this before the start of its automated election preparations last year and before the bidding and procurement activities were held during the first quarter of this year, Tuazon said. Power failures and transmission problems are two of the 30 vulnerabilities of the Comelec's automated election system (AES) that CenPEG has identified.

“This is not a doomsayer talking, this is a factual truth, and we have been saying this based on CenPEG's study citing a NEDA 2007 report that the country has 90% failure in IT infrastructure,” said Tuazon.

The CenPEG political analyst said the poll body was mandated to conduct a Geographical Information System (GIS) study last 2006 as part of its preparations for the fully-automated election but until today no such action has been done. GIS is a computer-based system for storing, organizing, analyzing and displaying spatial data. It displays reference and thematic maps that can help model, analyze, plan and manage elections in 2010. It is to help both Comelec and Smartmatic plan the shipping, transport, storage, deployment, and operation of 82,000 PCOS machines and 1,800 CCS machines, Tuazon said.

In its ongoing GIS study, CenPEG found that out of 45,255 public elementary schools scheduled to be tapped for the automated poll in May 2010, only 84 percent have stable power supply and up to 16 percent do not have power connections. Even in so-called stable power areas, electrical supply is limited each day showing that power interruptions are a daily occurrence.



PRESS RELEASE

CENTER FOR PEOPLE EMPOWERMENT IN GOVERNANCE

Chairman Melo's fears are not without basis, however," Tuazon said. "The Department of Energy also revealed they are expecting power shortages in 2010 and this will obviously affect the automated polls in May."

"We therefore call on the Comelec and its advisory council to stop labeling critics negatively because it is truth that will set the elections free of fraud and violence," Tuazon said

Moreover, transmission problems are also imminent in significant areas: only 10 percent of the schools have internet connectivity and 72 percent will have to rely on cellular transmissions where cell sites are possibly available. Up to 18 percent of the schools are not wired.

Dr. Pablo Manalastas, CenPEG IT consultant and Senior Fellow, on the other hand, said internet connectivity does not play any role in Smartmatic-TIM's plan since the foreign consortium will use its own cellular modems to connect the PCOS machines to the internet. "We should worry more about the presence or absence of cellular GPRS/3G/HSDPA signal in the schools rather than their internet connectivity," he said.

Both Comelec and Smartmatic-TIM officials said they will tap the satellite system to transmit election data in areas where internet or SMS is unavailable. But satellite connectivity has yet to be firmed up and no pre-testing has been done either, sources told CenPEG.

Comelec is faced with logistical constraints and lack of time to ensure internet, SMS, or satellite connectivity, the sources warned.

CenPEG asked the Joint Congressional Oversight Committee to look into the budget allocations for the automated election. "It appears that Comelec failed to anticipate that the financial requirements for the telecommunication transmission could be bigger than what have been allotted," he said.

"It's about time that the committee should conduct a hearing in order to once and for all determine how prepared the Comelec really is for the May 2010 election and whether its continuity and contingency plans will work," he added.

For reference:

Prof. Bobby Tuazon

Director for Policy Studies

Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)

3/F CSWCD Bldg., UP Diliman, Quezon City

Tel/Fax 9299526; Email address: info@cenpeg.org, cenpeg.info@gmail.com

Mobile Phone 0929 8007965