

Elections, E-Monitoring, and Empowerment: The Vote Report PH Experience

by Rick Bahague and Leon Dulce

rick@cp-union.com

Computer Professionals' Union

ABSTRACT

The 2010 Election called for a few new methods in monitoring the full process. Technical know-how on voting machines, network and security, and data protection became a major concern of monitoring efforts. Citizens monitoring during the 2010 elections highlighted the need for efficiency, fast, and precision in coordinating and reporting irregularities to thwart efforts in tampering votes and results.

Short messaging system (SMS) and the extent of voter education will definitely have an impact on outcomes of future monitoring efforts, as it did in the 2010 Elections.

INTRODUCTION

The recent 2010 Philippine Elections was a landmark in our nation's history not only for the first time we had an automated election system (AES), but also was the first time that the online and Information Technology (IT) communities engaged in full-fledged electoral monitoring. The challenges that came with the AES emboldened the IT community to fully participate in the election process, lending their technical expertise to watchdogs and poll watch monitors. It was also the first time citizen journalists from the blogging community were accredited by the COMELEC.

Among the major efforts for election monitoring was the SMS-integrated, Ushahidi-based electoral monitoring system project, the Vote Report PH [1] deployed by the Computer Professionals' Union (CPU). The Vote Report PH Team has previously shared in its site [2] its initial experiences in monitoring the automated polls. To date, it has pegged the total number of reported election irregularities at 654 cases, all verified through our extensive networking with poll watchers trained in monitoring the AES, thereby giving credibility to the reports.

MONITORING METHODS

The VoteReportPH monitoring system integrates SMS, e-mail and web posts to an Ushahidi-based website which then maps the events as they are reported. Similar systems were done in India, Sudan, Mexico and in West Africa. These systems were limited in success either for lack of Internet connectivity or the paucity of reports that came in, averaging around 400 to 500, most of which were unverified.

The system works like this: incident reports on the ground are reported to the Vote Report PH team via SMS, web, email and other social networking tools. Reports are aggregated on a customized database applications (maximizing cheaper USB modems and unlimited sms marketed by local networks) where volunteers sort reports into verified and unverified. Unverified reports are replied to

using the system to further corroborate the reports. Select verified and documented reports are then posted on the monitor page of Kontra Daya, the electoral watchdog that CPU worked with throughout the election season. The monitor page is then aggregated via RSS feeds by the Vote Report PH system, where volunteers plot the reports on Ushahidi's Google maps-based GIS. Another free and open source SMS-based application, Frontline SMS, was used to blast announcements and updates to the team's nation-wide network of poll watchers.

Vote Report PH worked with Kontra Daya, #juanvote network, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Workers Electoral Watch and other people's organization to extensively gather and verify reports.

A review by the Technology for Transparency Network [3] has identified Vote Report PH's approach as different in its 6-month pre-election preparations. The team engaged in a voter education campaign on how the voting process in the AES works, its issues and vulnerabilities, and how they can participate in monitoring it through Vote Report PH. Indeed, any good system is only as good as the extensiveness of its usage.

Also lauded by Technology for Transparency are Vote Report PH's own blogging efforts to highlight the most urgent reports of vote fraud. This was also employed during the transmission and canvassing periods of the election, seeing that the general populace has already gone lax with the risks of electoral fraud and errors, given that millions of votes have already been transmitted. It was also the first to report that the reflected registered voters in the national canvassing exceeds the actual count.

CONCLUSIONS

MobileActive.org recently came out with an in-depth look into two interchangeably used but markedly different concepts: Citizen Reporting and Election Monitoring. In a nutshell, Election Monitoring is deemed a more systematic discipline that can serve as basis for evaluating the elections. On the other hand, citizen reporting can provide on-the-ground perspectives from the grassroots but usually isn't a fitting basis for scientific assessments. Vote Report PH attempted to integrate these two concepts in its 6-month preparation, extensively conducting voter education sessions to introduce to the communities the Vote Report PH system and Kontra Daya's monitoring guide, and holding trainings for volunteer trainers for their decentralized initiatives.

The team believes that these well-documented reports can serve as concrete basis for any legal and political action to hold the Philippine government's Commission on Elections (COMELEC) accountable. They have, after all, dismissed the possibility of massive technical problems and fraud in the AES despite being forewarned by CPU more than a year before. We have said before that the electoral battle for the major political forces might already be over, but the struggle for genuine AES integrity and credibility still continues.

Overall, Vote Report PH has been a significant success as an effort to empower ordinary citizens with a means of monitoring the electoral exercises in the Philippines. It has utilized appropriate technologies to have a broad reach over the entire voting population. We aim to further develop the system to be more crowd sourcing-friendly, without compromising the report credibility through verification. In general, we seek to employ these technologies beyond the election process and into the progressive movement for social change.

REFERENCES

- [1] Computer Professionals' Union, <http://www.votereportph.org>
- [2] Ricardo Bahague, VoteReportPH: New tools for old problems, 2010, <http://www.votereportph.org/aes-update/>
- [3] Sopheap Chak, VotereportPH, 27 March 2010, <http://transparency.globalvoicesonline.org/project/votereportph>