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**NATIONAL CITIZEN'S MOVEMENT FOR FREE ELECTIONS (NAMFREL) IN  
THE PHILIPPINES: THE RISING OF THE CITIZEN POWER**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As the world's first citizen-led election watchdog, National Citizen's Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) sets as the pioneer when it comes to election monitoring particularly in the Southeast Asia region for their cause to strive for a wider space for the democracy. Therefore, it is particularly important to document and analyze the role of NAMFREL during the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos. This paper looks at the significance of elections as a pillar for democratic process especially the civil and political rights of citizens to monitor electoral process under the experience of authoritarian leadership. Election under the regime of Marcos has been tainted with fraud, intimidation, corruption, abuse of power, used of government machinery, money politics and a long list of unfairness, unclean and injustices. However the existence of NAMFREL helps to bring back the power to choose to the people and expose the hypocrisy of the flawed system.

**Keywords:** *Election Monitoring, NAMFREL, Philippines*

## **Introduction**

Ferdinand Marcos became the President of the Philippines in 1965. In order to remain in power, the ruling government under Marcos suppressed the freedom of expression and blocked any forms of criticism at all costs. Marcos declared Martial Law on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1972 for the entire country and justified that such law is necessary for building the “New Society” in the Philippines and to deter the communist terrorism. But in reality, the Martial Law was being used rampantly to suppress any dissenting voices against his authoritarian government.

After the declaration of the Martial Law, a mass crackdown began with the military arrested the opposition politicians including the famous late Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, journalists, students and labor activists. It has been reported that more than 30,000 detainees were kept under the military detention during that time. The Martial Law finally ended in 1981 after much pressure from the local and international communities. The malpractice during Marcos era irked the citizens and triggered them to take actions and at that time, the NAMFREL stood up as a resistance towards the undemocratic practice by the autocratic regime.

### **What is Election Monitoring?**

Election monitoring could be defined as an activity by one or more independent bodies generally refers to the independent Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to assess the conduct of an electoral process on the basis of national law and international standards.

The election monitoring activities cover the full cycle of the election process. The cycle could be divided into three stages. First stage is the pre-election activities such as

voter's registration, voter's education, nomination of the candidates and the campaigning period. Second is on the Election Day itself, which covers the opening of polling stations, voting process, closing of the polling stations and transportation of the ballot boxes to the counting or tabulation center. Third process is the post election activities such as counting process and proclamation of results.

There are two types of election monitoring. First is the domestic election monitoring which is also the main focus of this paper. The local organization or body in the particular country conducts its own domestic election monitoring.

Second is the international election monitoring or usually being known as international election observation. The international organization or international body carries out this type of election monitoring or observation. The Asian Network for Free Election (ANFREL), National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), and the Carter Center are some of the instances represent such international organizations that have been actively involved with the international election observation around the globe.

### **NAMFREL in the Philippines**

According to Eric C. Bjornlund in his book, *Beyond Free and Fair: Monitoring Election and Building Democracy*, he highlighted that the non-partisan election monitoring mechanism is widely unknown to the world until the emergence of the NAMFREL in monitoring the 1986 Snap Presidential Election in the Philippines. It could be proudly say that apart from the success of NAMFREL in opposing the autocratic regime of Marcos, it is also the pioneer of non-partisan election monitoring in the world.

Bjornlund in his book also refuted the claim that the NDI has assisted the formation of NAMFREL in the 1980s. It is in fact through the NAMFREL that the NDI sent its first

international observation mission for the 1986 snap presidential election, and worked closely with the NAMFREL volunteers. This further helped to shape the direction of the NDI.

The assassination of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino has sparked the anger of the Filipino people especially those opposed to the Marcos regime, in which it resulted to the establishment of NAMFREL.

In September 1983, 29 people gathered at the residence of Mars Quesada, a businessman who is actively involved with the Citizens National Electoral Assembly (CNEA) and led the organization for Caloocan Chapter to discuss the political situation in the country. The idea of forming an organization similar as the CNEA back in the 1970s emerged during the discussion. A month later, another meeting was held where this time, it was attended by some prominent figures like Joe Concepcion Jr., a wealthy businessman whom owned the RFM Corporation; Jaime Ferrer, the former chair of the Commission of Election (COMELEC); Vincente Jayme, the leader of the Private Development Corporation of the Philippines (PDCP) and the representatives of Cardinal Sin, the Archbishop of Manila.

The meeting subsequently decided to form NAMFREL in which Joe Concepcion became the Chair and Mars Quesada became the first Secretary General. In the beginning, the acronym for NAMFREL was NCMFE. Then it was changed to NACFREL and finally it was decided to use NAMFREL as the acronym. According to Damaso G. Magbual, NAMFREL is chosen because it is easy to pronounce and catchy to remember. For the first six month after the formation of NAMFREL, the congressional election or in the Philippines, being termed as the *Batasan* election are scheduled to be held and this became the first major task of the NAMFREL.

The partnership of Concepcion and Quesada is a powerful strength of the early formation of the NAMFREL. Concepcion and Quesada traveled all over the country to popularize the roles and functions of NAMFREL. While Concepcion took care of the “big

shots”, Quesada focused on the grassroots and the management of the organization. After much effort, Concepcion managed to lobby the business community and brought the best people in the country to join NAMFREL. Quesada also designed a manual book on how to organize the NAMFREL.

One of the main key successes of the NAMFREL came from the strong support of the business community and the churches. Without the help from these groups, it is impossible for the NAMFREL to be in full force especially in the limited condition of the suppressive ruling government. As the churches are deemed as powerful symbol in the Philippines, NAMFREL managed to expand its network to the entire country at the provincial and municipal level. In many events, the church leaders at the particular area lead NAMFREL in the provincial and municipal chapter. The business community supported the NAMFREL through cash and in kind donations. From the personal interview with Damaso G. Magbual, it was informed that the organization usually received 20percent cash donation and 80percent in kind donation from the business community.

#### **The *Batasan* or Congressional Election, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1984**

The *Batasan* or Congressional Election held in 14<sup>th</sup> May 1984 was the first test for the newly-formed NAMFREL at that time. The 1984 votes are being seen as one of the fairest and cleanest election in the Philippines history. Prior to the election, NAMFREL’s first activity was to lobby for electoral reform.

NAMFREL has put forward the eight-point proposal to improve the elections in order to be free and fair in which these was accepted by the government, as listed below:

- i) Immunity from being arrested, questioned and detained from speaking or writing their views. At that time, there are numbers of presidential decree that heavily suppressed the freedom of speech and assembly. Some of them carried the death

penalty, which has caused a lot of opposition candidates, refrain from running the election fearing their life.

- ii) The military should remain in the barrack on the Election Day. During the past elections, it was reported that the military disrupted the voting process and intimidated the voters.
- iii) No polling election district to be allowed inside the military post.
- iv) The ballot paper should be printed on watermarked paper in order to distinguish it from the fake ballot.
- v) Indelible ink should be used to prevent multiple voting. From the past elections, there was a lot of accusation of “flying voters” which means voters who vote more than one time.
- vi) All candidates should have an equal access to the media. Previously, the opposition candidates failed to get sufficient coverage of media during the elections.
- vii) It is suggested that the polls should ends at 3pm so that all the ballots counting could be completed before dark. This is because there have been a lot of reported cases where the ballot boxes went missing during the counting process particularly at the nighttime.
- viii) The need for a new voter registration. The opposition candidates claimed that the electoral role has been tainted in various forms.

The immense pressure from the government of the United States on Marcos to hold a free and fair election resulted the latter to turn “soft” with all the demands. According to Satur C. Ocampo, the obsession of Marcos to legitimacy is the main reason for him to agree with such demands for electoral reform. Marcos agreed with all the demands from the NAMFREL and ordered the interim parliament to vote them into the Election Code. The COMELEC then

granted the accreditation for NAMFREL. With the accreditation, NAMFREL became the official “citizens’ arm” for the COMELEC. With this, the NAMFREL managed to recruit more than 150,000 volunteers for the *Batasán* election to cover almost 85percent from the entire polling precincts.

One of the most notable achievements by the NAMFREL is the introduction of the Operation Quick Count (OQC) for the *Batasán* election aimed to verify the official vote count by the COMELEC. The OQC was done through the collecting of the results from the polling places and tabulate it, which later on became the trademark of the organization. Since the early introduction, the OQC was done at the gymnasium of the La Salle University, donated by Brother Rolando Dizon; one of the members of the NAMFREL’s national executive committee.

The results of NAMFREL’s OQC has exposed that the opposition candidates won 16 out of 21 seats in Metro Manila. The official results by the COMELEC also indicated the same. The effort of the OQC has been well proven especially in the Metro Manila area where the NAMFREL has strong resources. Nevertheless at the national level, through the manipulation of the vote count, COMELEC declared that the party of Marcos, *Kilusang Bagong Lipunan* (KBL) or New Society Movement won 124 seats while the opposition only managed to get 59 seats. COMELEC managed to manipulate the vote count nationally especially in the area where NAMFREL didn’t have a strong presence and resources.

In the area that has a strong presence of NAMFREL, the cheating cases have apparently being reduced and the opposition candidates have seen to win the seats. While most of the areas without the NAMFREL’s volunteers particularly in the ten districts, all of the seats won by the ruling party, the KBL. Generally, there were still cases of the massive vote buying during the 1984 *Batasán* Election. It has been reported that, the ruling party has paid 20 to 50 pesos for each voter. While the vote switching and ballot stuffing by the election

personnel have been reportedly in favor of the KBL, the opposition candidates hardly get any fair media coverage as promised by the COMELEC. There were also problems with the new voter registration where in some area; it is totally benefited the KBL party. The presence of the NAMFREL in the 1984 *Batasan* Election has nevertheless managed to bring back the confidence and trust of the people and the opposition parties that there is still a hope towards the election system in the Philippines.

On the other hand, the government of the Philippines and the COMELEC were rather unsatisfied with the success of NAMFREL. They tried in many ways to discredit NAMFREL. One of the accusations was the foreign funding that the NAMFREL received for its operation, which is not true. The COMELEC did not continue the accreditation of NAMFREL after the 1984 *Batasan* Election.

### **The 1986 Snap Presidential Election**

The pressure from the local and international communities forced Marcos to declare the Snap Presidential Election on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1986, a year earlier than scheduled. The opposition agreed to field only one candidate, Corazon “Cory” Aquino, the widow of Ninoy to be the candidate to have a straight fight with Marcos. When COMELEC ended NAMFREL accreditation after the 1984 *Batasan* Election, the reason given was NAMFREL’s term as citizens’ arms ended alongside with the election.

Another reason is the accusation that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funded the organization. In the 1950s, CIA funded National Movement for Free Elections, which has the same acronym with NAMFREL. This has directly given NAMFREL a hard time to explain their differences with the 1950s NAMFREL. It was not an easy task for NAMFREL to regain their accreditation. One of the efforts is to collect one million signatures on a petition urging the COMELEC to grant them the accreditation. The petition was presented to the *Batasan*. However that did not help NAMFREL to regain their accreditation. However,

NAMFREL continues to lobby for their accreditation nationally and internationally. After giving the hard time for the NAMFREL to get the accreditation, the COMELEC finally granted it on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1985 with the condition that Joe Concepcion must swear under oath that NAMFREL has not and will not receive foreign funding.

The success of the NAMFREL in 1984 has made the organization became more popular among the Filipino people. With the slogan “from Batanes to Tawi-Tawi”, NAMFREL grows all over the Philippines archipelago. The NAMFREL managed to recruit 500,000 volunteers as poll watchers. Besides that, almost 2 million citizens have joined the NAMFREL to guard the ballot boxes all over the country after the voting.

The OQC has again lightened the Philippines history. The Filipino people vested trust in NAMFREL’s OQC rather than the COMELEC’s official tally. On 9<sup>th</sup> February, two days after the election, the NAMFREL’s OQC showed that Cory Aquino has gathered votes much ahead by one million compared to Marcos. One of the biggest events of the 1986 Snap Presidential Election was when nearly 40 data entry personnel of the COMELEC walked out as a sign of protest after receiving order to manipulate the results. According to Joe Concepcion, that incident was one of the events that he will always remember because it has directly shown the success of NAMFREL campaign for an honest, free and fair election.

On 14<sup>th</sup> February, the COMELEC announced that Marcos is the winner of the election. Majority of the Filipino people were upset because they were more confident with the NAMFREL tally. The result brought to the split in the military forces. The Defense Minister at that time, Juan Ponce Enrile and Lieutenant Fidel Ramos planned to stage a coup against the Marcos regime.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> February, Marcos discovered the plan. Juan Ponce Enrile and Fidel Ramos had to hide at the Defense Ministry Complex in Manila, however Cardinal instructed the Filipino people to protect them. Subsequently more than one million Filipino people

conquered the street of *Epifanio de los Santos Avenue* (EDSA) with majority of NAMFREL volunteers took part with other Filipinos for the four days peaceful demonstration that forced Ferdinand Marcos to step down and flee to Hawaii. The People Power revolution brought the success of Cory Aquino, as the Philippines President on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1986.

### **The Challenges of NAMFREL**

NAMFREL encountered aggressive challenges from their autocratic governments in their ordeal to achieve democracy. In the Philippines, Marcos established the Movement of Voters for Enlightenment and Reform (MOVER) to challenge the growing influence of the NAMFREL. The membership of MOVER was largely originated from the Marcos's daughter youth organization. Without any difficulties, the COMELEC accredited MOVER as another "citizens' arm" and suggested NAMFREL to conduct poll watching in the morning while the MOVER in the afternoon. The MOVER was set-up to serve as an alternative to NAMFREL but in fact it worked closely for President Marcos.

The strong lobby from the American government who has been accused of supporting a dictator has forced the Marcos's government to recognize NAMFREL. However the government through the COMELEC often gave hard time for NAMFREL in term of accreditation and cooperation for the election monitoring effort. The government used various ways to damage NAMFREL's credibility by accusing them of being created by the CIA and received foreign funding. Coincidentally, the acronym of NAMFREL is similar to the name of an organization set-up by the CIA during the 1950s for the election at that period. Of this, NAMFREL has faced a hard time to explain that they are not in any linkages to the American-oriented NAMFREL and the CIA.

During the 1986 Snap Presidential Election in the Philippines, NAMFREL lost a few volunteers that sacrificed their life in order to protect the democracy in the Philippines. Most of them work as NAMFREL volunteers at the provincial or municipality level.

Besides the obstacles from the autocratic government, NAMFREL also faced critics from the opposite group of the regime saying that what they do was in fact legitimizing the bad conduct of election process from both dictators. The left wing group proposed a boycott towards the elections during the Marcos era because the elections were deemed as not free and fair. And when NAMFREL was formed, the boycott group accused the NAMFREL a “rubber stamp” for Marcos’s bad conduct of the elections. But NAMFREL proved that they were right and continues to play significant roles that finally drove to the People Power revolution in the Philippines that ousted Marcos from the presidency. The trust and confidence that have been given to the NAMFREL by the Filipino people for its OQC have installed the actual winner of the election, Cory Aquino as the President of the Philippines. Bienvenido “Bien” Lumbera conceded that the decision of the leftist in the Philippines to boycott the election at that period was a mistake because the group failed to read the sentiment of the masses that were actually eager for a massive change. Satur C. Ocampo echoed his view on this issue.

## **Conclusion**

The transition of administration power from Ferdinand Marcos to Cory Aquino is seen as one of the major successes by the NAMFREL, it is being seen as a dictatorship turns into transitional democracy chapter for the Filipino. Before the success story of NAMFREL for its effort during the 1986 Snap Presidential Election, the world has never heard about citizen’s movement in election monitoring. NAMFREL in the Philippines has contributed greatly in pioneering the citizen’s participation in monitoring election to the world. They have also been nominated for Nobel Peace Prize by a few international organizations that recognize its roles in bringing back the democracy path to the Philippines through the peaceful method.

Mars Quesada, the first Secretary General of NAMFREL has traveled to 22 countries around the globe to share the experiences of the Philippines and to convince those people that

they also can practice what NAMFREL did in the Philippines. Non-partisan domestic election monitoring movement started by the NAMFREL has catalyzed the democratic transition and further created a momentum for a global struggle for democratization.

In Asia, Independent Committee for Election Monitoring (KIPP) in Indonesia is one of the examples that influenced by the NAMFREL. They went against the Soeharto regime though it came with high risks. KIPP plays a pivotal role as a pioneer of the election monitoring in Indonesia. KIPP, which is still a newbie during the last election under Soeharto in 1997, did not have much time to organize their election monitoring effort as what the NAMFREL experienced in the Philippines. NAMFREL has more advantages because when they started in the 1980s, the Philippines already have the history of election monitoring since 1950s. Moreover, the lack of resources and funding has posed a major stumbling block to the journey of the KIPP.

Election monitoring has thus become popular and recognized by many governments in Asia. Nowadays, the governments of the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan gave accreditation to more than one local election monitoring organizations. These governments also accredited the international observation mission and did not see it as a form of interference instead as a support towards the democratization process. Both domestic and international organizations normally work closely in solidarity to achieve their goals in empowering the people to participate in the democratization process.

As a contribution at the regional level, both the NAMFREL and KIPP joined other election monitoring organizations from Asia to form the Asian Network for Free Election (ANFREL). ANFREL is a regional network for election monitoring organization from the Asian countries that has actively supporting the democratization processes in the Asia region through their international observation missions and capacity building programs.

According to Ichal Supriadi, the Executive Director of ANFREL and former KIPP Jakarta Chapter Chief, ANFREL has since 1997 served more than 40 elections all over Asia. ANFREL also became one of the signatories of the Declaration of Principles and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, which was signed at the United Nations, New York in 27<sup>th</sup> October 2005.

Election monitoring efforts by NAMFREL not only benefited the democratization in the Philippines but also support the democratization process regionally and globally. It is valuable to share the experience of NAMFREL to the neighboring countries, which is still ruled by the autocratic governments. NAMFREL has effectively proven that no matter how strong the ruling regime, it could never able to stop or to 'kill' the citizens movement.

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