



## **PRELIMINARY STATEMENT**

### **Voters' commitment to democracy marred by systemic deficiencies**

**Manila, 14 May 2025**

*This preliminary statement of the EU election observation mission (EU EOM) is delivered before the completion of the entire electoral process. Critical stages remain, including tabulation of results and adjudication of petitions. The EU EOM is now only in a position to comment on observation undertaken to date, and will later publish a final report, including full analysis and recommendations for electoral reform. The EU EOM may also make additional statements on election-related matters as and when it considers it appropriate.*

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#### **Summary**

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On 12 May, Philippine voters went to the polls, demonstrating citizens' strong commitment to democracy and civic values, despite the persistence of vote-buying, which the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) only partially addressed through stricter regulations and initiatives. The 2025 National and Local Elections took place against the backdrop of a continued dominance of few political families in the lists of candidates, detracting from overall competitiveness, unacceptable election-related violence, mainly in municipal and city races, with at least ten persons killed on election day, and subjective limitations on the right to stand. The elections were also marked by a vibrant and highly visible campaign, and pluralistic media coverage, both of which enhanced voters' ability to make an informed choice.

As per the EU EOM methodology, the EU and the Filipino authorities signed an Administrative Arrangement setting the basis for the EU EOM, granting the mission and its members 'freedom of access, at any time, to all polling stations and counting/tabulation centres,' and also ensuring that all mission members shall abide by the COMELEC's International Election Observer Accreditation Guidelines and the EU EOM Code of Conduct. Disregarding prior commitments, the COMELEC's assertions that EU observers were not allowed in the voting precincts, widely reported in the media ahead of election day, undermined the EU EOM's ability to meaningfully observe voting procedures. Consequently, the Mission did not deploy its full team of 226 observers as originally planned. As only a very limited number of observations of the polling was made, the mission is not in a position to assess the voting process in accordance with its established methodology.

The EU EOM deployed its teams of observers across polling precincts in the country to observe counting. In nine of the 93 visited precincts, the EU observers were denied entrance, despite written assurances to the contrary provided by the COMELEC. The observation of the counting was then conducted in 84 polling precincts and was assessed positively in 82 of the observations. During the election night, confidence in the process was affected by delays in availability of the transmitted results via the so-called transparency servers. Provincial and municipal canvassing was observed in 137 centres, and entrance was denied in two.

The legal framework provides the basis for holding democratic elections, but it is dispersed across multiple laws and regulations that have largely superseded the 1985 Omnibus Election Code. Nearly half of the Code's provisions are no longer applicable, undermining the legal certainty of the texts, including those related to international election observation. The COMELEC adopted several resolutions aimed at tackling long-standing issues such as vote-buying and the labelling of individuals as members of communist movements (red-tagging). Its regulatory interventions have at times amounted to *de facto* law-making, leaving some of the initiatives open to legal challenges.

The COMELEC ensured the timely preparation of polling stations and the deployment of automated counting machines (ACMs) and ballots. EU EOM observers found the COMELEC's regional, provincial, city, and municipal branches to be experienced and competent, and generally trusted by stakeholders. Delayed decisions and rigid technical procedures, for example on the early printing of ballots, were prioritised over providing voters with clear and accurate information on the final list of candidates while final rulings on the eligibility of several candidates were still pending. The COMELEC's public communication efforts were proactive and diverse, and included the distribution of personalised voter information sheets to all registered voters. Before the elections, there was widespread trust among most of the population and stakeholders in the accuracy and effectiveness of the system for counting and transmitting election results.

The voter register included 69,673,655 voters, of whom around 1.2 million were overseas voters. Women accounted for 50.9 per cent of registered voters. The COMELEC innovated to improve access to registration and changes of registered address, by expanding deployment of satellite registration points and by enabling voters to process their registration anywhere in the country. These measures contributed to making the register more inclusive. Cases of amendments in response to complaints, court cases or routine updating were reported in the weeks just prior to election day, potentially causing confusion to some voters.

The ballot paper included a total of 66 senatorial candidates, 615 candidates for the 254 district seats in the House of Representatives, and 155 party-list groups contesting the 63 proportional representation seats. Women remained underrepresented on the lists: out of the 41,401 candidates contesting the 18,255 seats in all election races, 22 per cent were women. Based on the COMELEC's broad discretionary powers to reject or cancel candidacies, powers that are not fully aligned with international standards on the right to stand, two thirds of the 184 candidate applications for the Senate, and 20 out of 635 candidacies for the House of Representatives district seats were rejected. The absence of clear deadlines for resolving disputes related to candidate and party-list registration undermined both the right to an effective remedy and the right to stand for election. In addition, in approximately 20 per cent of the district races, candidates ran unopposed, typically the incumbents, limiting genuine pluralistic competition and voter choice in those districts.

The PNP noted 111 election related incidents across the country during the election period. According to media reports, at least 30 people, including several candidates and election officials were killed. On election day, violence prevailed across the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Southern Mindanao (BARMM) and other hotspots. At least 10 fatalities were recorded. While violence was more prevalent in connection to local rather than national elections, it often aimed to intimidate stakeholders, thus influencing the overall atmosphere. State institutions, including the COMELEC, were responsive, among others actively updating the lists of 'areas of concern', with their overall number remaining stable throughout the election period. Two municipalities in BARMM were placed under COMELEC control in response to violence and to mitigate the risk of unrest. A gun ban is in effect since 12 January until 11 June, with illegal possession of a firearm cited as the most common offense during the period. Some inflammatory rhetoric in BARMM and several red-tagging instances were observed in Cebu and Davao cities, Benguet, La Union and Pangasinan provinces and the National Capital Region (NCR).

EU observers witnessed several credible indications and received reports of vote-buying through cash and goods, as well as partisan distribution of welfare payouts (*ayuda*). Moreover, the suspension by the Ombudsperson of an incumbent gubernatorial candidate few days before the elections, which is contrary to good electoral practice, raised concerns about potential breaches of the principle of neutrality required during electoral periods. The COMELEC responded to complaints alleging discriminatory and sexist speech in the campaign by issuing a number of investigations, with one candidate disqualified for this reason.

Overall, media coverage of the elections enabled voters to access information and make an informed choice. However, state-funded media overwhelmingly focused on President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and his administration. Defamation remains a criminal offence in the Philippines, and certain legal provisions concerning freedom of expression and press freedom do not fully align with international standards and good practices. Major private broadcasters in their news programmes also dedicated a discernible portion of their coverage to the administration, nevertheless, the coverage was centred around senatorial candidates

Towards the end of the election campaign, some candidates appeared to artificially boost their exposure, gaining up to 100,000 of new followers per day. From 28 March, the EU EOM assessed the tone and content of 93,440 posts in six most-spoken languages, 47,870 of which were election-related, indicating heated political debate. Threads on vote buying or *ayuda* (1,434 posts), were prominent in the online space, generating a total of 599,330 reactions in engagement. These posts were commented on 105,232 times, viewed by over 740,051 people and shared 160,725 times. This topic was covered by contestants in 121 posts and shared 14,222 times.

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*The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) has been present in the Philippines since 28 March 2025 following an invitation from the national authorities of the Republic of the Philippines. The Mission is led by Chief Observer Marta Temido, Member of the European Parliament (MEP). In total, the EU EOM accredited 226 observers from 25 EU Member States, Canada, Norway and Switzerland across the country to assess the whole electoral process against international obligations and commitments for democratic elections as well as the laws of the Philippines. A delegation of the European Parliament, headed by Vladimir Prebilič MEP, also joined the mission and fully endorses this Statement.*

*This preliminary statement is delivered prior to the completion of the election process. The final assessment of the elections will depend, in part, on the conduct of the remaining stages of the election process, in particular, the completion of canvassing, and the handling of possible post-election day complaints and appeals. The EU EOM remains in country to observe post-election developments and will publish a final report, containing detailed recommendations, within two months of the conclusion of the electoral process. The EU EOM is independent in its findings and conclusions and adheres to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation endorsed at the United Nations in October 2005.*

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## **Preliminary Findings**

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### **Background**

On 12 May, Filipino voters elected the 20th Congress, including half (12) the Senators in a nationwide constituency and all 317 members of the House of Representatives: 254 from single-member districts and 63 through national party-lists. Elections for provincial, city and municipal executives and assemblies were also held concurrently. The first ever elections for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) Parliament are planned for 13 October 2025.

The 2022 elections brought President Marcos Jr., son of former ruler Ferdinand Marcos, and Vice President Sara Duterte to power under the *UniTeam* alliance, which has since unravelled. On 5 February 2025, Sara Duterte was impeached by the House of Representatives on charges including alleged graft, bribery and betrayal of public trust. The Senate is scheduled to try her in July, with two-thirds majority required for a conviction. The arrest and transfer of former President Rodrigo Duterte to the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 11 March on charges of alleged crimes against humanity during his tenures as Mayor of Davao and later President served to further deepen the rift within the political leadership and polarised the public.

Political parties play a largely nominal role: many lack ideological orientation, with candidates' allegiances shifting even during the campaign, which could affect voters' ability to make an informed choice. Political power in elected offices at all levels is concentrated in the hands of dynastic families. However, informal party alliances shape electoral competition: President Marcos leads the Alliance for a New Philippines

(*Alyansa para sa Bagong Pilipinas*), while the *DuterTEN* is backed by Vice President Duterte and her father, the former President and now Davao City mayoral candidate. Other significant actors include the Liberal Party-affiliated *KiBam* and *ISambayan* coalitions, *Dilawan* slate, as well as the *Makabayan* bloc.

## Legal Framework

Overall, the legal framework provides a basis for the conduct of democratic elections in line with international commitments and standards signed by the Philippines. Electoral rules are scattered through multiple laws and supplemented by numerous COMELEC resolutions. This complex legal framework is primarily based on the 1985 Omnibus Election Code. EU interlocutors estimated that nearly half of its articles are no longer applicable as they have been superseded by the 1987 Constitution and by subsequent laws, that have overridden specific provisions and entire sections of the code on voter and candidate registration, campaign, voting and counting procedures and electoral offences among others. There is no harmonised version of the election code, nor a mechanism to document which provisions are no longer in force. This affects the legal certainty of the texts, as is the case with the applicable provisions on international observation. Campaign finance is insufficiently regulated.

The COMELEC issued resolutions introducing substantive changes on issues such as online voting, digital campaigning, artificial intelligence, and campaign rules. While these were often welcomed by stakeholders, particularly those on red-tagging,<sup>1</sup> vote buying, and discriminatory speech, some resolutions have effectively created new rules, testing its constitutional mandate. This regulatory overreach amounts to *de facto* law-making, bypassing the legislature and raising serious concerns about legal hierarchy and certainty, as this approach remains vulnerable to challenges. For instance, the resolution regulating overseas online voting has been challenged before the SC. Furthermore, its decisions have shaped the application of electoral rules, particularly on party registration, eligibility, and seat allocation, compounding legal complexity.

To fully align with international standards, some provisions require revision, namely those on eligibility, candidate registration and status, campaign finance, complaints and appeals, and sanctions. Other key issues remain unaddressed, including a comprehensive regulation of political parties and provisions to limit the dominance of political dynasties, as mandated by the Constitution.

## Election Administration

The COMELEC ensured preparation of polling places and the timely deployment of the automated counting machines (ACMs) and ballots. EU EOM observers found that COMELEC staff at regional, provincial, city, municipal branches were experienced and competent, and generally trusted by electoral stakeholders.

The COMELEC enabled EU EOM observation of pre-electoral events and locations, including trainings, materials transport and stockage, and the pre-deployment preparation of ACMs as well as their Final Testing and Sealing (FTS) in polling precincts (*see Election Technology section*). Prominent civil society organisations met by the EU EOM reported a marked improvement in the COMELEC's approach to sharing information and responding to suggestions.

In some cases, delayed decisions and inflexible technical processes took precedence over ensuring clear and accurate information for voters. This was the case when, to ensure all ballots were readable for the ACMs, several weeks were allocated to the manual verification of all 69 million ballots. A different verification

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<sup>1</sup> Red-tagging is a term commonly used in the Philippines to describe the practice of labelling individuals or groups as members of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) or its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA).

method or surplus ballots might have enabled later printing, with fewer instances of candidates appearing on the ballot who had in fact been disqualified or had withdrawn (*see Registration of Candidates section*).

Training of members of the Electoral Boards responsible for overseeing voting procedures was conducted early in the year, ensuring its completion at an initial stage of the electoral preparations. Some details on usage of the ACM functions, such as display of votes onscreen, were finalised at a later date and ‘refresher’ sessions during the last weeks of April actually had to address some subjects for the first time. Usefully, manuals and an online learning platform were prepared for Electoral Boards, although the design of the latter could have been more user-friendly. At times too, there were delays in communicating technical information to Electoral Boards, such as with the issuance of ‘supplemental contingency procedures’, approved in a resolution on 8 April, and available on the COMELEC website only several weeks later, and later still on the Electoral Board learning platform.

Precinct results were transmitted directly to political, media and civil society stakeholders, facilitating rapid access to results. However, the only political parties to receive this information directly were the established ‘dominant majority’ and ‘dominant minority’ parties,<sup>2</sup> as a result of legislation that grants these parties preferential access to precincts and information, an out-dated distinction for a multi-party democracy.

The COMELEC’s efforts to communicate to the public were proactive and varied, ranging from ‘roadshows’ to present the new ACMs throughout the country, to media appearances and social media posts. Although it was difficult to ensure that it reached all registered voters, the Voter Information Sheet was a positive endeavour, aiming for personal contact with voters, at the same time as providing them with information about where they would vote and what their ballot would look like. The initiative sought to effectively replace candidate-distributed sample ballots with institutional, impartial information.

## Election Technology

Technology is integrated across various stages of the electoral process, including ballot design, printing, and verification, as well as voting through optical mark recognition machines, automated counting, transmission of results, and their final publication, and the online voting for overseas voters. New ACMs were introduced following a tender process with only one qualified bidder. While the process followed established procurement rules, EU EOM interlocutors raised concerns regarding the overall transparency of the procedure, as the former provider of vote counting machines was barred from participating.<sup>3</sup>

There was widespread trust among most of the population and stakeholders in the accuracy and effectiveness of ACMs. A core component of the automated system is the secure counting, transmission, and tabulation of votes. It has undergone source code review, software implementation process, and certification, overseen by the COMELEC, the Department of Information and Communications Technology, the Department of Science and Technology, and an international third party. Citizen observation groups PPCRV and NAMFREL, as well as IT professional organisations were invited to observe these procedures, strengthening transparency and public trust. However, the final certification report was delayed beyond the legal three-month deadline and was published only shortly before election day. Although various tests have been conducted and not formally contested, their results are not publicly accessible, weakening transparency.

<sup>2</sup> COMELEC designates the dominant majority and minority parties, defined by law as the main pro-administration and opposition groups, based on criteria such as candidate count, past performance and poll watcher capacity. For the 2025 elections, LAKAS-CMD and *Nacionalista*, both part of the pro-presidential alliance, were respectively named the dominant majority and minority parties.

<sup>3</sup> The Supreme Court later overturned this decision on the grounds that the company was barred before submitting the offer. The SC ruled however that the contract with the new supplier should remain in place.

EU observers reported logistical setbacks in the delivery and storage of ACMs, instances of insufficient training, and challenges encountered during the Final Testing and Sealing (FTS) of the machines in some provinces. Connectivity remained a concern in many places and FTS did not foresee testing transmission. Altogether, these factors raised doubts before the elections about troubleshooting capacity and the overall reliability of the system on election day. The limited reports available suggest that efforts were made to ensure a coherent voting process, despite instances of ballot rejection and incorrect ballot evaluations.

The COMELEC has introduced other measures to enhance transparency, such as voting receipts (VVPATs) with QR codes confirming the voter's selection but offering no remedy in case of discrepancy with the ballot. There is no established procedure for their use in verifying the results. The COMELEC committed to releasing election-related logs, including transmission logs, a step that would significantly enhance transparency. Yet the decision on timing, format, and method of release was not known before the elections. Although the system quickly produces results, there are no procedures established to reconcile the number of ballots cast with the count of signatures in the voter list, which is not mandatory, preventing full reconciliation of results. The Random Manual Audit in 762 clustered precincts starts two days after the elections. This process is intended to verify the accuracy of ACMs through manual vote counting in the randomly selected sample of precincts. Overall, while the COMELEC seemed committed to transparency and preparation, including contingency planning, there was room for improvement in the details.

## **Voter Registration**

Voter registration is active and opens only in pre-electoral periods, which for the 2025 elections spanned February to September 2024. Active registration poses a challenge to ensuring all eligible voters are included, and for the 12 May elections, the COMELEC innovated to improve access to registration and changes of registered address, by expanding deployment of satellite registration points, piloted in 2022, to malls, local halls, universities, government offices and church organisations, as well as to indigenous communities (*see Women and Under-represented Groups section*), and in prisons to register eligible citizens in detention. These initiatives were bolstered by the Register Anywhere Program, which enabled voters to process their registration outside their municipality. In another positive feature, voters turning 18 years old between the registration period and election day were able to register. All these measures increased the inclusivity of the voter register, although reports of lengthy queues persisted, particularly towards the close of the registration period, to the point that some were still not able to register. The final voter register for the 2025 elections included 69,673,655 voters, of whom 68,431,965 were in-country voters, an increase of over 2 million voters since the 2022 elections. Women made up 50,9 per cent of all registered voters.

Voter registrations are initially reviewed by municipal election registration boards before approval. Subsequently, the COMELEC crosschecks fingerprints from biometrics data of all registered voters, to identify possible multiple registrations. In December 2024, the COMELEC reported having identified over 400,000 multiple registrations, most of which were the result of legitimate changes of address, while around 100,000 were based on 'questionable' changes of registration location, commonly known as 'flying voters'. The COMELEC asserted that accidental multiple registrations are deleted, while in the case of unsubstantiated changes of address, a phenomenon particularly associated with municipal elections, the COMELEC did not rule out investigations to ascertain whether there had been attempted electoral offences. Although petitions for inclusion or exclusion from the voter register could be made until 1 February, and final lists of voters were required to be posted on 11 February, some cases of amendments in response to complaints, court cases or routine updating were reported in the weeks just prior to election day, potentially causing confusion to some voters.

Following the introduction of online voting for the vast majority of the 1,241,690 voters registered abroad, a further enrolment in the online platform was required. Approximately 135,000 citizens did so during the enrolment period between 20 March and 7 May, then extended twice until 12 May. This could point to a substantially lower turn-out than that registered for the previous mid-term elections (18 per cent.)

## Registration of Candidates

Candidates for Congress must be natural-born citizens of the Philippines, literate, meet a minimum age requirement, be registered voters, and reside in the constituency they seek to represent. The election code disqualifies individuals who have been declared insane, convicted of rebellion, serious crimes, or offences involving moral ‘turpitude’ from running for office for five years after serving their sentence. Those found guilty of election offences also lose their right to run for office and to vote. The suspension of suffrage rights after a sentence is served may be disproportionate in view of international standards.

The election code grants the COMELEC substantial discretionary powers to reject or cancel a candidate’s application (certificates of candidacy) if it believes that it ‘makes a mockery of or disrepute to the election process.’<sup>4</sup> In practice, this provides the COMELEC with vetting authority to disqualify candidates based on its overall subjective assessment of their credibility and capacity to conduct a legitimate campaign. The COMELEC holds similar powers when registering party-list groups representing marginalised sectors.

Candidate applications were submitted to the COMELEC from 1 to 8 October 2024. On 30 January 2025, it released the official list of candidates: 66 for 12 Senate seats, 615 for 254 district seats in the House of Representatives, and 155 party-list groups contesting the 63 proportional representation seats. Out of the 41,401 candidates contesting the 18,255 seats in all election races, 22 per cent were women. Several SC rulings broadened the interpretation of eligibility for party lists. As a result, more than half of the registered groups (86 out of 155) are allegedly linked to political families or business interests, often lacking a clear connection with the represented group,<sup>5</sup> negating the original aim of genuine sectoral representation.

The COMELEC rejected two thirds of the 184 candidates’ applications for the Senate, labelling them ‘nuisance candidates’ and 20 out of 635 candidacies for the House of Representatives district seats. Eighteen of these decisions were challenged before the Supreme Court, with 14 cases remaining unresolved on election day. The absence of deadlines for resolving candidate and party list registration disputes undermines both the right to an effective remedy and the right to stand for election, as even if the Supreme Court overturned the COMELEC decisions, reinstated candidates could not run, as ballots were printed in January 2025. The COMELEC also retains the authority to disqualify candidates and party lists during the campaign period for violations of electoral rules, including discriminatory and sexist remarks, and vote-buying (*see Campaign Environment section*). The lack of objective criteria for exclusion and the high number would-be candidates prevented from running are at odds with international standards.

According to the COMELEC, approximately 20 per cent of the candidates for the House of Representatives district seats ran unopposed, the vast majority incumbents. Over 60 per cent of these uncontested candidates were affiliated with Lakas-CMD, the majority party in Congress. However, this figure may not be definitive, as it does not account for disqualifications and withdrawals that occurred after the close of the registration period. The lack of centralised and readily accessible information from the COMELEC on the final list of candidates and party lists contesting the elections left voters vulnerable to misinformation and rumours, hindering their ability to make an informed choice. EU observers received reports that some candidates in

<sup>4</sup> Omnibus Election Code, section 69.

<sup>5</sup> Kontra Daya – Press statement, 12 February 2025.

House of Representatives district races came under pressure to withdraw. Some interlocutors opined that in several cases, candidates with the same or similar last names stood in the elections only to confuse voters.

## Campaign Environment

The senatorial and party-list campaigns that began on 11 February, and the district representative campaigns that followed on 28 March, were highly visible, with campaign materials saturating public spaces.<sup>6</sup> Voter engagement was strong nationwide but belied the fact that one in five district races was non-competitive, typically featuring only the incumbent. Some stakeholders opined that political programmes of some parties were not distinguishable and often overshadowed by personality stagecraft, which could negatively impact the availability of genuine political alternatives to voters.

Despite the COMELEC's efforts to address the issue through regulations and initiatives, including a dedicated task force (*Kontra Bigay*), vote-buying remained entrenched and endemic: EU observers witnessed several credible indications and received reports of vote-buying through cash and goods, including so-called 'bidding wars' among contestants.<sup>7</sup> EU observers witnessed indications of vote-buying at five of the 98 observed campaign events. The popular e-pay application G-Cash restricted options for money transfers including on election day to combat vote buying. EU observers reported countrywide partisan distribution of welfare payouts (*ayuda*). Distribution of rice packs branded with the President's initials and free Manila transport on Labour Day weekend enjoyed extensive media coverage that amplified their appeal. The COMELEC launched 689 investigations, issued over 100 show cause orders,<sup>8</sup> and disqualified at least one candidate at first instance.

Contrary to good practice, during the final two weeks, several state institutions initiated actions with potentially significant political ramifications. On 29 April, the Ombudsperson suspended Cebu Governor and candidate Gwendoline Garcia over alleged misconduct, despite a rule barring such actions within 90 days of elections.<sup>9</sup> On 30 April, the presidential administration announced a probe into a water distribution firm, owned by the family of a senatorial candidate endorsed by Vice President Duterte.

The COMELEC responded to complaints alleging discriminatory and sexist speech in the campaign by issuing a number of further show cause orders, but penalties that include disqualification for speech-related violations may be disproportionate and infringe on free expression. In this regard, one candidate was removed from the race for violations of the rules against vote buying, another one for sexist remarks during the campaign. EU observers in Leyte, Pampanga and Southern Leyte provinces and in the National Capital Region (NCR) received reports on barriers to accessing public assembly venues and unequal treatment.

Electoral violence is a recurrent feature of Philippine elections, manifesting through intimidation, harassment and violent incidents targeting candidates, their supporters and election administrators. The PNP noted 111 election related incidents across the country during the election period. According to media reports, at least 30 people, including several candidates and election officials were killed. On election day, violence prevailed

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<sup>6</sup> The EU EOM observed a total of 98 campaign events, including 72 rallies, 11 meetings, 2 door-to-door contestant visits, as well as 13 others, including motorcades. These events took place in 34 of the 82 provinces and in the National Capital Region. The atmosphere was mostly described as calm (59 percent) and enthusiastic (59 percent).

<sup>7</sup> The EU observers witness instances of vote buying or *ayuda* in Bohol, Davao Oriental, La Union, Palawan, Quezon, Siquijor, Zamboanga City and Zamboanga del Sur provinces. Red-tagging was reported or observed in Cebu City, Davao City, Benguet, La Union, NCR and Pangasinan provinces. EU observer also witness limitations to public assembly in Leyte, NCR, Pampanga and Southern Leyte provinces.

<sup>8</sup> A show cause order is a legal directive issued by a court or authority requiring a person or entity to explain or justify why a certain action should not be taken against them.

<sup>9</sup> Section 63, Local Government Code.



across BARMM and other hotspots, with at least 10 fatalities recorded. While violence was more prevalent in connection to local rather than national elections, it often aimed to intimidate stakeholders, thus influencing the overall atmosphere. State institutions, including the COMELEC were responsive, among others actively updating the lists of ‘areas of concern’, with their overall number remaining stable throughout the election period. Two municipalities in BARMM were placed under COMELEC control in response to violence and to mitigate the risk of unrest. A gun ban is in effect since 12 January until 11 June, with illegal possession of a firearm cited as the most common offense during the period. Some inflammatory rhetoric in BARMM and several red-tagging instances were observed in Cebu and Davao cities, Benguet, La Union and Pangasinan provinces and the NCR.

Candidates ran positive online campaigns, rarely mentioning opponents. About 60 percent of senatorial and congressional candidates were active online. During the 17-18 April campaign silence, 53 percent of candidates refrained from posting, with most sharing only holiday greetings. However, 35 ads valued at PHP one million (approx. EUR 16,000) remained active on Facebook. Campaign silence was not respected by at least half of the senatorial candidates. A total of 54 ads worth PHP 9 million (approx. 146,000 EUR) were still online during the electoral silence.

There is no public funding for campaigns. Donations are uncapped, though foreign and anonymous sources are prohibited. Spending limits have not changed since 1991.<sup>10</sup> Candidates report finances up to 30 days after elections, which does not facilitate informed choice. In several cases, private property and events were used for campaigning to bypass regulations: EU observers were barred from observing campaign-like events billed ‘private’ in several instances, including in Cebu and Puerto Princesa (Palawan). The prohibition on campaign spending before the start of the campaign is ineffective and skirted by many prospective candidates, further skewing the playing field.<sup>11</sup> Weak regulation and uneven enforcement affected equal opportunity and transparency.

## Media

Philippines has a vibrant media environment with some 2,100 private broadcast and online media, alongside three state-funded media. At the same time many media outlets are perceived as politically affiliated. High Internet penetration contributes to the importance of online content, including online platforms and particularly Facebook, which, together with television and radio, serve as primary sources of information.

The private outlet GMA Network has a biggest audience share, while the franchise of its main competitor, the ABS-CBN, was not renewed in 2020. It continues to broadcast, nonetheless with significantly reduced production. As a result of what was widely seen as a politically motivated decision due to its critical stance against former President Duterte, access to diverse information, in particular at regional level, continues to be adversely affected. Long-standing challenges to journalists’ work, such as incidents of intimidation, including red-tagging, impunity for violence and economic fragility persist. Positively, as reported also by EOM interlocutors, the atmosphere has improved overall, and the intensity of hostilities has decreased.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, respected during the campaign. Defamation, including online, remains criminalised, and some legal provisions are still not in line with international standards and good practice. There is no general media law. The election legislation vests a loose media oversight to the COMELEC. It performed its role based on complaints, and on reports, mandatorily submitted by the media

<sup>10</sup> Spending limits are PHP 3 (EUR 0.05) per voter for parties and PHP 5 (EUR 0.08) for independent candidates.

<sup>11</sup> In *Penera vs. COMELEC* (2019) the SC ruled that individuals are only considered candidates only once the campaign has started, political advertising by prospective candidates prior to this is not subject to limits.

concerning their paid advertisement allocation. The EU EOM was informed that during the campaign there were no media-related complaints or proceedings against media on the COMELEC's own initiative.

Media election coverage is regulated by the Omnibus Election Code and the Fair Elections Act. The law provides for specific time and space allocation of paid advertisements, with up to 120 and 180 minutes to each candidate or political party contesting a national seat by television and radio broadcasters, respectively. Advertisements have become the most visible campaign tool in the media, particularly in television. Its volume visibly increased during the last two weeks of the campaign, with several contestants releasing new variations of their commercials. Paid ads were aired by almost all private monitored broadcasters.

The EU EOM monitoring revealed that there was active media coverage that provided voters with opportunities to make an informed choice. State-funded media overwhelmingly focused on President Marcos and his administration. Major channels in their news programmes also dedicated a discernible portion of their coverage to the authorities, including the COMELEC. Nevertheless, the coverage was centred around senatorial candidates. While major broadcasters, GMA-7, ABS-CBN and TV5 covered multiple candidates, SMNI adopted a different approach and showed clear preferential treatment of PDP-Laban. There has been a comprehensive political coverage across monitored online outlets, including Rappler that provided more local related coverage. At the same time, numerous interview formats were organised by major broadcasters for the Senate candidates, and by the local media for HoR and local candidates. While the interviews somewhat substituted lack of critical and analytical news reporting, most of the top-rated candidates opted not to take part, to the detriment of the voters.

## Social media

Social media are gradually replacing traditional media in the Philippines, becoming the primary source of information for young, urban audiences. All major traditional media outlets maintain social media accounts, often publishing information there before announcing it in print or on air.

Over 90 million Filipinos have at least one social media account. Facebook is the dominant platform, used by over 90 per cent of adults, followed by TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. X is used by around 31 per cent of adults but is widely employed by politicians to communicate with the public. Two COMELEC resolutions relate to social media: one bans red-tagging and derogatory speech, while the second regulates the spread of disinformation and use of artificial intelligence (AI).<sup>12</sup>

While social media accounts of reputable media outlets generally reported facts, their comment sections became battlegrounds filled with polarised arguments around specific political issues. Red-tagging, low digital literacy and fake supporters were the main challenges in the context of 2025 elections. The EU EOM monitoring revealed that online red-tagging remained widespread and continued to be a serious issue with new cases reported every day. EU EOM interlocutors claimed widespread use of trolls and paid supporters, acknowledging the difficulty in distinguishing between orchestrated and genuine support.

Towards the end of the election campaign, some candidates appeared to artificially boost their exposure, gaining up to 100,000 of new followers per day. From 28 March, the EU EOM assessed the tone and content of 93,440 posts, 47,870 of which were election related, indicating heated political debate with mostly positive tone. Threads on vote buying or on *ayuda* (1,434 posts), were prominent online, generating a total of 599,330 reactions in engagement. These posts were commented on 105,232 times, viewed by over 740,051 people and shared 160,725 times. This topic was covered by contestants in 121 posts and shared 14,222 times.

Meta works with local fact-checkers and partners, offering CSO training and maintaining direct

<sup>12</sup> COMELEC resolutions 11116 and 11064 respectively.

communication channels with trusted partners and the COMELEC<sup>13</sup> Harmful content is detected by Filipino-speaking moderators and Meta's AI model. Meta's local office employs 10 people, with only one handling social policy issues. A recent agreement between Meta and fact-checkers strengthened the system of reimbursing CSOs for each verified detection of malicious content, encouraging more identification of misleading information. Meta policies during election silence remain problematic, as there are no specific provisions for campaign silence online. Meta claims advertisers are solely responsible for purchasing ads, though they could be blocked at the sales level. Political ads active during silence period could have been blocked only if identified by partners or the COMELEC and reported to Meta.

## **Participation of women and under-represented groups**

### *Women*

Women remain underrepresented in Philippine politics: they account for 23 per cent of elected officials, 28 per cent of congressional seats (in the outgoing Congress), and six per cent of cabinet posts. Among the seven COMELEC commissioners, two are women. In the 2025 elections, women made up 18 per cent of Senate candidates and 22 per cent in the House of Representatives, and just eight per cent in BARMM HoR districts. Only six of 155 party lists focused exclusively on women's welfare.

The COMELEC promoted women's participation by launching tailored voter education programmes and a pilot project with women-led CSOs in Davao, Ilocos and the NCR aimed at empowering aspiring female candidates. It also took steps to address gender-based harassment during the campaign by classifying discrimination and sexist remarks as electoral offences<sup>14</sup>, and implemented the Safe Spaces Act in the electoral context, banning gender-based harassment online and offline<sup>15</sup>. Despite legal guarantees and COMELEC initiatives, persistent barriers include gender stereotypes, political dynasties, costly campaigns, violence, and low confidence.

### *Participation of persons with disabilities*

The COMELEC introduced a series of measures for the 2025 elections, including mobile registration units for vulnerable voters and priority lanes at all voting centres. Nearly 7,800 accessible polling precincts (APPs), located on the ground floors of voting centres, were established to facilitate voting to over 11.4 million registered voters aged over 60 and approximately 500,000 pre-registered Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). For those who had not pre-registered to vote at APPs, COMELEC set up 3,301 priority polling places (PPPs), where electoral boards collected voters' ballots for subsequent insertion into the ACMs of the corresponding clustered precinct.

For the first time, COMELEC established early voting hours on election day from 5:00 to 7:00 a.m. exclusively for vulnerable voters. PwDs and illiterate voters could be assisted by a person of their choice or a member of the Electoral Board. Hearing impaired voters were able to confirm their selections with headphones connected to the ACMs. The COMELEC's efforts to accommodate the needs of PwD are commendable, reflecting a genuine commitment to facilitate their participation. However, implementation remained uneven, particularly in remote areas with limited infrastructure.

### *Indigenous peoples*

In January 2025 the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) and the COMELEC signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to enhance the participation of members of the Indigenous Cultural

<sup>13</sup> In the Philippines, Meta is still working with local partners, no community notes system has been introduced in the country, as was the case in the USA

<sup>14</sup> COMELEC Resolution 11116.

<sup>15</sup> COMELEC Resolution 11127.

Communities (ICCs) in the 2025 elections. As a result, a total of 64 Accessible Voting Centers (AVCs), 25 Exclusive Separate Polling Places (ESPPs) and 15 Clustered Separate Polling Places (CSPPs) were established in remote areas across the country to enable some of the 951,870 voters who, in accordance with good practice, self-identify as Indigenous Peoples (IPs) to vote. According to the COMELEC, culturally sensitive voter education was conducted in some areas in cooperation with organised civil society. ACMs were demonstrated to IP communities to help familiarise them with the voting process. Despite efforts, outstanding barriers remain, including low engagement by candidates. Only two of the lists contesting the party-list elections purported to represent IPs and very few included IPs among their candidates.

### **Civil Society and Domestic Observers**

The Philippines boasts two very experienced electoral civil society organisations: the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) and the PPCRV. Both have monitored elections in the Philippines for over 30 years, and both are now accredited as 'citizen arms' to the COMELEC, a status contemplated by the Constitution, and which entails, in addition to oversight, support to the COMELEC in key areas such as voter education.

NAMFREL and PPCRV observed numerous aspects of electoral preparations, as well as deploying large numbers of observers on election day, and preparing their role in the COMELEC's Random Manual Audit, to take place after the elections. While PPCRV and NAMFREL both carried out a parallel vote tally, only NAMFREL planned an audit of precinct vote receipts (VVAPTs), for 60 precincts in 10 provinces.

For its part, the Legal Network for Truthful Elections (LENTE), a network of lawyers, paralegals and volunteers, advocates for electoral reform as well as leading public education activities, and a range of smaller organisations, also provide civic scrutiny of the elections. These include Kontra Daya (Against fraud), Vote Report PH and Democracy Watch PH, as well as a wide range of local and regional organisations, all functioning on a voluntary basis to contribute to voter education and scrutiny of the election administration and candidates. The COMELEC invited a range of international bodies, including, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), who launched an observation mission at the end of April, with 21 observers deployed for several weeks before election day.

### **Polling, Counting and Transmission**

Lack of guarantees regarding access to polling precincts during voting hours, compounded by the COMELEC's public statements on the matter in the lead up to elections, prevented EU EOM observers' ability to conduct a meaningful observation of voting procedures on election day in line with the commitment previously undersigned by the EU, the Philippine authorities and the COMELEC. Although a limited number of EU observers were able to attend voting in some precincts, the mission is not in a position to report on its findings in accordance with its established methodology, for which it prepared 226 observers to deploy on election day. After the close of polls, the EU EOM deployed its observers across the country to follow the counting and canvassing process.

Regardless, the EU EOM noted that lack of space is cited as an explanation to limit access to precincts for poll watchers other than from the dominant majority and dominant minority party, as well as for national election observers other than citizen arm organisations. The EU EOM was able to confirm that precincts were indeed often overcrowded, though this seemed largely due to the decision to cluster precincts together, effectively raising the limit of voters per voting location to 1000.

Legal provisions for election observation are spread across the Election Code, many of which have been superseded, alongside regulation, most recently the March 2025 Accreditation Guidelines For Domestic &

International Election Observers, and the General Instructions for the Electoral Boards for the 12 May 2025 Elections. In the absence of a consolidated and up-to-date framework, this key element of transparency is subject to legal uncertainty.

The EU EOM observed closing and counting procedures in 84 clustered precincts, with 82 observations assessed positively. In nine precincts, the EU observers were denied access.<sup>16</sup> The atmosphere in precincts was calm and conducive to the counting process. Some precincts experienced difficulties transmitting results, although most of these issues were resolved. Procedures were generally adhered to, and poll watchers and observers were able to follow the process without significant hindrances. Canvassing at municipal and provincial levels was observed in 137 centres, and entrance was denied in two.

During election night, confidence in the process was affected by delays in availability of the transmitted results, including those for political parties, media and some civil society organisations via the so-called transparency servers. The COMELEC dashboard displayed incoming results in batches rather than the expected steady flow, raising questions about the directness of the transmission process. On 13 May, the national election observation organisation Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) reported discrepancies between the number of election returns transmitted to the COMELEC's server and those sent to the transparency servers and requested that COMELEC take action in this regard.

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An electronic version of this Preliminary Statement is available on [philippines2025.eueom.eu](https://philippines2025.eueom.eu). For further information, please contact:

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<sup>16</sup> Two in Cagayan, two in Calabarzon, two in Ilocos and two in Soccsksargen.