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MANILA — The presidential and local elections in the Philippines were observed by 41 international observers from the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL). This was the first year the PCOS—precinct count optical scanner—machine system was used.

Having arrived in Manila on May 2, I was assigned with a colleague from Bangladesh to observe the election in Mindanao region in the southern Philippines. We flew to Zamboanga city early on May 5 and then had to take a 13-hour journey night ferry from Zamboanga City to Sulu Island of Mindanao.



A local interpreter met us on Sulu, who immediately took us to register our arrival at the local base of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

There, the local commander, Gen Rustico Guerrero, told us election violence was to be expected, but it is just one of the security problems on Sulu.

A part of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao that includes Basilan, Tawi-Tawi, Minguidano and Davao, Sulu is infamous for kidnapping, especially of foreigners, and it is where Muslim rebel groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and Abu Sayyaf have been fighting the central government for autonomy for decades.

Guerrero said Sulu is considered a likely “hot spot” for bomb attacks, shootings and killings and other election related violence. He warned us not to go to areas not firmly in army control, especially in the coastal regions where insurgents are active.

The warning was repeated by the police, who told us Abu Sayyaf had threatened to disrupt the election.

We observed the election run up in Sulu, where representatives from the Commission on the Election (Comelec) told us many citizens in rural areas lacked voter education. NGO workers we met said vote buying was to be expected in the interior, but we did not witness any as we were assigned to witness the election process in Zamboanga City in western Mindanao. Sulu was considered unsafe.

The Philipinos appeared to take a lively interest in the election. The elderly and handicapped patiently waited their turn to vote for the president, vice-president, congressmen and local governors. For some, the waiting was too long, since voters could still be seen queueing outside the polling centers when the precincts closed at 7 p.m. On May 10. Some blamed Comelec for disenfranchising them.

In the remoter villages in Zamboanga City's administrative area, many voters did not receive voter education. One woman said she learned about the system from television.

In the more than 40 precincts we visited in Zamboanga City, most of the voters said they preferred the PCOS machines because they no longer had to write the full names of the candidates as in the past.

Some PCOS machines had problems, however, rejecting ballot papers, and in precincts in remote villages there was no secrecy in the voting process. Observers in Basilan later told us that they witnessed a lot of vote buying.

An interesting factor of the election was that prison detainees who had not yet been convicted of crimes retained their right to vote. One detainee said he was happy to vote and prison authorities had not put any pressure on him regarding his choice.

Asking whether detainees should be able to vote, criminologist Ester Galvez-pepito said: "Why not? They [detainees] are innocent until proven guilty, so why shouldn't they vote?"

One housewife who had just voted said, "My vote is very important. All votes count for the future of our country."