

Philippines: Defer Maguindanao Province Division Plebiscite!

Monday 12 September 2022, by [OMELIO Goldy](#) (Date first published: 7 September 2022).

Enough Time for an Informed Decision!

The Interfaith Movement for Peaceful and Clean Elections (IM4PEACE) is a non-partisan peoples' movement which acts as citizen's electoral watchdog that works closely with Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) in Maguindanao and Cotabato City.

Republic Act 11550 or an Act Dividing the Province of Maguindanao into Two (2) Provinces, Namely: Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur was passed by the houses of Philippine Congress and signed into law last May 27, 2021 by former President Rodrigo Roa Duterte. RA 11550 has also mentioned that a plebiscite should take place within 90 days after the enactment. The plebiscite should be held according to aforementioned law together with the National and Local Elections last May 9, 2022.

However, in Resolution 10716 last August 18, 2021, the COMELEC En Banc has deferred the plebiscite on the Division of Maguindanao Province including that of the four other plebiscites "...in order to concentrate all its resources in the preparation for the May 9, 2022 [elections]..." and such conduct is scheduled "four months from the end of the election period". Furthermore, a COMELEC Resolution No. 10797 promulgated and made into public only last July 22, 2022 the schedule of the plebiscite was set on September 17, 2022.

We believe that such postponement could have provided enough time not only for the Commission to prepare but for the people to be efficiently informed so as to arrive a fair decision.

However, we have noticed that after the public announcement of the plebiscite schedule, huge tarpaulins campaigning for the YES votes have sprouted in many places in the province of Maguindanao but no information drives and or education pertaining to Republic Act 11550 and the conduct of the plebiscite were held in the communities.

These observations are validated during the consultation held by several civil society organizations in Cotabato City last 6-7 of September 2022 attended by representatives of indigenous peoples organizations, religious formation as well as representatives coming from the sectors of women, youth, urban poor and farmers of tri-people communities from Maguindanao province. Testimonies from the consultation also revealed that many of the constituencies of the province do not even know about the plebiscite not until they have attended the said consultation. We strongly believe that at least people in the province deserve to see the pros and cons of the subject of the plebiscite. This education campaign should be beyond Yes or No positions. We agree with the Chairperson of the Commission when he said that this plebiscite is "...for your future..." and not just about voting "...Yes to win or for No to win enough. We should make sure that the people can vote..." democratically and freely.

We strongly believe on the sanctity of the constitutional mandate of the Commission as an

independent body which includes ensuring the conduct of free, fair and honest elections and the sanctity of the peoples' informed decisions in a democratic country like the Philippines.

On this regard, we, from the Interfaith Movement for Peaceful and Clean Elections (IM4PEACE) calls the Philippine Congress, the Commission on Election and the Office of the President to defer again the plebiscite date for a maximum of two months. This is to give ample time and resources for massive and substantial information sharing on the plebiscite and the content of the RA 11550. With this, we are confident that decisions made out of the plebiscite are rightfully made and will be an informed one.

We also call on the civil society community and human rights advocates to join us in this call and help filling in the gaps of information and in the push for peoples' democratic participation in this political process and beyond.

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