

**MINUTES OF THE PRELIMINARY MEETING OF
THE COMMITTEE ON SUFFRAGE AND ELECTORAL REFORMS/
POLITICAL PARTY REFORM**

1. **Call to order.** The meeting formally started at 11:06 a.m. with nine (9) out of the twenty-four (24) committee members present.

The present Commissioners were:

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| a) Cecilio T. Seno, <i>Chair</i> | f) Nelia T. Gonzalez |
| b) David C. Naval, <i>Co-Chair</i> | g) Emily M. Marohombsar |
| c) Angelo M. Abarico | h) Mel Senen S. Sarmiento |
| d) Alfredo E. Abueg, Jr. | i) Jose D. Villanueva |
| e) Ronald L. Adamat | |

2. **Committee organization.** The Committee commenced with Chairman Ceno soliciting the body's opinion on the need to define the scope of the Committee on Suffrage and Electoral Reforms/ Political Party Reform.

The Chairman proposed the formation of three (3) sub-committees that will be responsible on the different topics which the Committee is tasked to evaluate. These are: *Suffrage*; *Electoral Reforms*; and *Political Party Reform*. It was initially suggested that Commissioner Abueg chair one of the sub-committees, but the commissioner declined explaining that per Commission rules, he is disqualified from holding a chairmanship of any committee or sub committee.

It was subsequently agreed upon by the body that no sub- committees shall be created and that the entire committee shall tackle each concern one by one.

3. **Discussion on Suffrage.** The discussion principally focused on adjusting the minimum voting age from 18 back to 21. All members present initially agreed to this proposal, particularly noting that the majority of the Filipino youth reach maturity only at 21.

The body, however, recognized that the proposal will be unpopular. Com. Marohombsar noted that among the issues to be considered were the original rationale why the voting age was pegged at 18 years, citing a possible question: "*if you can get married at 18, why can't you vote?*" This was seconded by Com. Villanueva citing that "*if you can die for your country at the age of 18, why can't you vote?*" For his part, Com. Adamat stated that this would be an unpopular vote since suffrage is a form of youth empowerment.

4. There was an extensive discussion led by Com. Sarmiento on the Sanggunian Kabataan (SK). There was general agreement that the SK has been highly ineffective as an institution and has become a training ground for corruption instead of good governance.

Coms. Sarmiento and Villanueva thus proposed the abolition of the SK. Commissioner Adamat, however, noted that this may already be the subject of local enabling laws.

5. Committee Co-Chair Naval raised the need to address the concern of voting for the illiterates. Com. Sarmiento commented that illiterates still exercise suffrage with the assistance of others. Com. Abueg emphasized the fact that Congress has yet to device a system where the illiterate can vote independently by providing enabling infrastructure in terms of facilities and modern equipment.
6. Com. Adamat then opened the discussion on absentee voting, commenting that it has not been effective. Co-Chair Naval clarified that absentee voting, as provided by law, only applied to national-level elections. The Co-Chair further noted that if the government shifted to parliamentary, there will no longer be a need for absentee voting laws since Parliamentary elections will only be up to the Congressional level.
7. Com. Abueg then noted that the Committee must also settle the question on whether suffrage should be a right or a citizen's duty or obligation, where failing to register shall have an appropriate sanction. The Commissioner referred to the 1973 Constitution which was worded in a manner that qualifies suffrage as a citizen's obligation.
8. **Invitation of Resource Persons.** Com. Sarmiento proposed that resource persons be invited for the Committee to have a more authoritative discussion on suffrage, electoral and political party reforms. The Commissioner that officials from the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) be invited. It was agreed that Com. Abueg shall verbally relay the request of the committee to select COMELEC officials, but at the same time, the Committee, through Chairman Seno, shall transmit a formal invitation letter to be drafted by the secretariat. It was agreed further that the letter be addressed directly to COMELEC Commissioner Resurreccion Borra, copy furnished the COMELEC Chairman.

Among the other topics which the body would like to discuss with the COMELEC officials are the proposal to raise the voting age from 18 to 21 years old; the terms of office of elected officials and the need to extend these; and, the political party reforms which the COMELEC is pursuing.

Commissioner Villanueva also suggested that Mr. Bill Luz of the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) be invited but there was no agreement on the matter.

9. **Committee Procedures.** To expedite committee discussions, Com. Adamat recommended that the Chair and the Co-Chair prepare working draft to include all the concerns to be addressed by the committee as a take-off point for deliberations. However, it was agreed upon that the present Constitution can serve this purpose, supplemented by the minutes of the committee's preceding meetings.

10. **Discussion on Political Party Reform and Electoral Reform.** Com. Villanueva raised the need to address the question on whether or not to maintain a multi-party system or a two-party system, which he underscored are possible under both the Presidential and Parliamentary systems. He added that political parties that shall be dominant must have a strong sense of history. The body initially agreed to promote the implementation of a two-party system, seen as a measure to minimize turncoatism among party members.

On electoral reforms, Co-Chair Naval placed before the committee a proposal to recommend simultaneous elections for local officials and the members of parliament. This move, coupled with the increase in the number of years for each term, is seen to be more efficient and cost effective for government. Com. Villanueva also recommended that limits on terms be eliminated because at the end of the day, it is still the people who will choose who to elect. Commissioner Abueg added that no bill on political dynasty will progress in Congress under the present system.

11. **Schedule of Subsequent Meetings.** Chairman Seno announced that the Committee's next meeting shall be held on the following Wednesday, October 19, 2005, at the same time and venue. The body further agreed that the Committee shall regularly meet on Wednesdays at 10 a.m. and requested the Secretariat to draft a Notice of Meeting to inform all Committee members.

12. **Adjournment.** The meeting was adjourned at 1:25 p.m.