

# IOM Report

on the 2025 Philippine  
Midterm Elections



International Observers Mission  
on the 2025 Philippine Elections

International Coalition for Human Rights  
in the Philippines | **ICHRP**

## WHAT IS THE INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER MISSION?

The International Observer Mission (IOM) is a people-led, independent election observation initiative rooted in international solidarity. It is organized by the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP), a global network composed of faith-based groups, trade unions, lawyers, parliamentarians, academics, and human rights defenders across the globe.

ICHRP launched the IOM in 2022 as a response to the 2nd and 3rd reports of the Independent International Investigation into Human Rights Violations in the Philippines (INVESTIGATE PH) released last 2021. Commissioners of INVESTIGATE PH recommended that an independent international election observer mission be conducted to maintain the integrity of the May 2022 presidential elections. The IOM concluded that the 2022 Philippine elections failed to meet the international standard of a free, honest, and fair election.

The 2025 IOM responded to the call for impartial international scrutiny of the Philippine electoral process, amid persistent reports of state-sponsored violence, fraud, and foreign military interference. The IOM centered on disenfranchised Filipino communities, particularly in rural and militarized areas.

## THE IOM COMMISSIONERS

The Commissioners for the IOM are eminent individuals in their own fields from different countries. They have long-standing records in monitoring elections, democratic governance, humanitarian work, and peace-building. They are as follows:

**Lee Rhiannon** - a political activist and former Australian Senator. Lee, as a member of the Australian parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, worked on significant reforms to the Australian electoral system. She has participated in a number of investigations of human rights abuses in the Philippines. In 2022, she was part of the IOM that monitored the Philippine national elections. Lee has worked on many international solidarity campaigns.

**Xavier Cutillas** - President of the Catalan Association for Peace, an organization founded in 1990 for international cooperation and global social justice, he is currently working on all continents and with more than 15 active projects. Xavier has worked on international solidarity and cooperation projects for more than 30 years.

**Sylvian Goldstein** - A trade union leader who is currently in charge of trade union relationships of the General Confederation of Labor-CGT in the Asia Pacific region. Goldstein is a member of France's Strategic Committee for Foreign Trade, Technical Advisor to the International Labour Organization (ILO), delegate to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH).

**Rev. Michael Blair** - Member of the Order of Ministry in the United Church of Canada (UCC) and current General Secretary of the General Council of the UCC. Blair has also served as a community chaplain and as a staff member at the University of Toronto.

**Colleen Moore** - Director of Peace With Justice at the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS). She is responsible for developing and managing the agency's legislative and policy advocacy in support of peace and justice. She works with United Methodist and secular groups to advance GBCS strategic priorities on peacebuilding, conflict resolution, nonproliferation and disarmament, and multilateralism.

**Andrea Mann** - Director of Global Relations in the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada (ACC). She is responsible for developing and supporting the church's international relationships for solidarity and justice. Andrea has served as Regional Mission Coordinator: Asia Pacific of the ACC and is the Co-Chair of the North American Ecumenical Asia Pacific Forum.

## METHODOLOGY

The 2025 IOM ran from April to mid-May, covering the campaign period and the May 12 election day. More than 50 international human rights advocates participated in the 2025 IOM with field Observers from different countries deployed across Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, focusing on areas with documented histories of electoral violence.

The Observers are human rights defenders in their respective countries and volunteered to support human rights monitoring in the Philippines during this election. Observers conducted field interviews with voters, poll watchers, campaigners, local officials, civil society and people's organizations, candidates, campaigners, government authorities, politicians, media, and churches.

Observers documented and triangulated data on human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) violations, in coordination with local watchdogs like Kontra Daya and Vote Report PH. Remote observation teams also monitored Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV), digital disinformation, and voting irregularities abroad.

All findings were validated and consolidated by a central research team and cross-referenced with media reports and independent sources. The research team is composed of volunteer researchers and Commissioners with long-standing records in monitoring elections and human rights work.

*The names of individuals and organizations interviewed and the places visited are not mentioned in this report for safety and security reasons.*





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# Executive Summary

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**Through deployment of research teams across the country, conduct of witness and expert interviews, and research, the International Observer Mission has come to the conclusion that the 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections did not meet international standards for free and fair elections.** Numerous factors, including systematic anti-people policies and counter-insurgency strategy, rule of domestic political dynasties, and foreign influence all played a role in violating the rights of Filipinos in the context of the election. In particular, the following issues were observed widely and were verified by the majority of Observers:

### **Systematic, coordinated, and well-funded red-tagging and disinformation against progressive candidates and party-lists**

Red-tagging — labelling individuals and groups as members or supporters of armed communist groups — interferes with the democratic process by attempting to discredit proposals for reform. Red-tagging was the most frequently reported violation in the 2025 election period according to Vote Report PH. Observers documented widespread cases in regions such as the Cordillera Administrative Region, Southern Tagalog, Bicol Region, Western Visayas, and Mindanao.

The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), already notorious for their role in red-tagging, heightened their attacks during the election period, calling for greater repression of civil society. The mission confirmed reports of disinformation posts

online and on the ground; for example, a fake press statement was circulated claiming the Bayan Muna party-list was disqualified for the elections. This was followed by the placement of makeshift coffins covered in red paint signifying blood, bearing posters vilifying progressive candidates. This continued on election day with flyers and posters targeting progressive candidates and party-lists.

### **Voter disenfranchisement and voting machine malfunctions**

Throughout the 2025 election period, electronic voting issues and disenfranchisement impacted voters' participation on a wide scale throughout the Philippines and overseas. On election day, the Mission, alongside Kontra Daya and Vote Report PH flagged several issues that contributed to severe voter disenfranchisement, including: malfunctioning automated counting machines (ACMs), reports of ballots being wrongly read as overvotes which effectively nullified valid votes, pre-marked ballots, reports of voters unknowingly voting for a different candidate, and reports of voters unable to find their names in the list.

Due to the “high sensitivity” of ACMs, slight smudges and extraneous marks in the ballots caused glitches, resulting in overvotes. Malfunctioning machines caused delays in voting and affected thousands of voters nationwide. Furthermore, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) has failed to explain why the ACMs ran version 3.5.0 software, rather than the publicly certified version 3.4.0, which raises

questions on the integrity of the elections.

There were 30 percent fewer Overseas Filipino voters registered than in the 2019 midterm elections, and the reported turnout was also lower, at just 18.12 percent. Difficulties with registering for a new online voting system were widely reported.

### **Vote-buying by certain party-lists and candidates, as well as anti-worker policies**

Vote-buying was observed on a wide scale this year. Many Filipinos accepted large amounts of money due to the difficulties they face trying to survive on low average wages. In some cases, party-lists funded by large businesses were able to pay out the equivalent of a month's wages per vote. The Ako Bicol party-list became one of the highest-voted party-lists, after the price for a vote for Ako Bicol was reported to be sixteen thousand pesos. Mass poverty and high inequality creates the foundation for vote-buying by rich and powerful elites, leading to a well-entrenched political system dominated by family dynasties.

Workers and those living in poverty were particularly disenfranchised by the elections. Election day was not declared a national holiday, so many Filipinos would not have been paid if they did not work, causing many to not turn out to vote. Even workers who attempted to vote after five in the afternoon were often unable to participate because of long wait times due to malfunctioning voting machines. Furthermore, candidates and party-lists were largely dominated by big business

and family dynasties against the interests of workers and average Filipinos.

### **Overwhelming influence and disproportionate representation of political dynasties and local elites**

The domination in this election by political dynasties, an oligarchy of elite families, raises concerns about the impact on democratic representation and political diversity. This resembles a caste system where only powerful and wealthy families can enter the political system. For example, three of the country's 10 wealthiest multi-billionaire tycoons are behind three of the country's five biggest political parties – Manny Villar (Nacionalista), Ramon Ang (Nationalist People's Coalition), and Enrique Razon (National Unity Party). In the 2025 elections, at least 78 out of the 156 party-list organizations certified by the COMELEC belonged to political dynasty families.

### **Election-related violence, including killing and abduction**

Election-related killings escalated before the election, particularly in the northern province of Abra and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) in southern Philippines. On election day, the mission documented riots and other incidents of violence ranging from fist fights to gun fights and shootings resulting in killings. Despite a nationwide gun ban during the election period, killings and shootings were reported in the provinces of Abra, Negros Occidental, Davao del Norte, Davao Occidental, Zamboanga del Sur, and BARMM.

## **Militarization and rampant violations of International Humanitarian Law**

The election period also saw continued violations of international humanitarian law (IHL), or the rules of war, occurring amidst a decades-long armed conflict between the Philippine government and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). Observers noted that the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) participated in targeting civilians in various forms: intimidating and threatening candidates, members of partylists and their supporters via red-tagging, abduction, home visitation by soldiers, and illegal searches. This was especially true in rural communities in the countryside dominated by increasing militarization.

## **Influence of foreign military might and American geopolitical interests**

From April 21 to May 9 this year, the Balikatan military exercises took place in the Philippines, with 10,000 US, Japanese, and Australian troops staging live-fire exercises alongside 5,000 Filipino troops in Mindanao, Palawan, Zambales, and Batanes. The exercises largely overlapped with the 2025 Philippine midterm elections, posing a threat to the freedom and sovereignty of the elections. Overinflating the threat of China and manufacturing a “national security emergency” skewed voters’ perception towards pro-US candidates like Marcos’ Alyansa Para sa Bagong Pilipinas slate. The Marcos administration sought

to stampede voters into supporting their chosen candidates who will further facilitate and justify the US pivot to Asia and military build up against China.

## **Harassment and barring of international observers**

The Philippine government continued its attacks against solidarity activists during the election period. Gordon Mutch, a member of the Baltimore Committee for Human Rights in the Philippines (BaltCHRP) who traveled to the country to observe the election, was detained at the airport and ultimately deported on the basis of tagging Mutch with “anti-government activities.” Observers were also harassed in-country, including one instance of Observers being filmed by armed men in plain clothes while interviewing Mission respondents.

A government with nothing to conceal would have no reason to restrict the entry of international election observers. The persecution of Observers is indicative of the increasingly militarist approach of the current government. The same mechanisms that are used to surveil and terrorize Filipino citizens in the Philippines, including tactics of NTF-ELCAC, are now being used to restrict the activities of international human rights advocates.

On May 19, electoral watchdog Kontra Daya and local partner of the IOM was red-tagged in a live-streamed episode of a rightist-aligned program. The host, known for his track record of red-tagging, singled out the organization and its leadership. The show airs on a network owned by



a known rights violator and currently embroiled in international and domestic sex trafficking charges and other serious criminal allegations. This attack, happening just as election monitoring efforts are concluding, reflects a broader effort to discredit and target independent watchdogs and undermine initiatives toward electoral transparency and accountability.

## Conclusion

Similar to the findings of the IOM for the 2022 national polls, the massive scale of problems identified in the 2025 elections rendered it neither free, honest, nor fair. The pattern of issues in the elections this year speaks to a much larger context of social inequity, fascism, foreign influence, and systematic human rights violations against the Filipino people.

The results of the elections, which were greatly influenced by widespread disenfranchisement of poor and oppressed voters, militarization and violence against marginalized communities, and state-led vilification of progressive candidates and party-lists, only further entrench the social inequities found in the country and the geopolitical dynamics at play in Philippine politics. The Filipino people continue to face the harshest of scourges of disenfranchisement, violence, and the threat of foreign invasion under the US Balikatan exercises. The elections favored political dynasties, seen most vividly in the maintenance of power of the Marcos clan and the re-election of former President Duterte as Davao mayor, despite his current imprisonment in the Netherlands for crimes

against humanity.

The 2025 elections do not appear to be an anomaly, but rather the continuation of systemic issues that have long plagued the Filipino people. It is of utmost urgency for the international community to pay heed to these major issues of systematic injustice, and call for a truly fair and democratic electoral system in the country.

## Recommendations

Drawing on evidence gathered by its Observers and the results of its thorough monitoring of the 2025 midterm elections, the IOM issues the following recommendations to the Philippine electoral system, its government, and the international community. The fact that many of these recommendations echo those in the IOM's 2022 final report underscores the persistence of systemic issues that continue to shape electoral processes in the Philippines.

### Changes to the Electoral System and Government Policies

The Mission calls for the adoption of a hybrid election system that combines manual counting at the precinct level with the automated electronic transmission of results. This system would replace the current fully automated process and enable an independent and impartial audit and verification of votes, strengthening public trust in the electoral process. It reiterates the call to urgently pass the Anti-Dynasty Bill and the enforcement of the original intent of party-lists in the 1987 Philippine Constitution. This will prevent political dynasties from dominating the



electoral arena. The COMELEC must uphold its nonpartisan character, with Commissioners appointed through an independent process. Additionally, it should establish a functioning grievance mechanism to address electoral complaints. Candidates who engage in vote-buying must be sanctioned and disqualified. Legal reforms must be enacted to strengthen protections for voters, enabling them to report such violations without fear of retaliation. Finally, the Philippine government must ensure an enabling environment for all foreign independent observers and global civil society organizations. The use of travel bans and surveillance against solidarity activists and foreign human rights advocates must cease immediately to uphold transparency, democratic accountability, and international standards for election observation.

### **Recommendations to the International Community**

The Mission calls on the international community to further monitor the human rights conditions and scrutinize the electoral process in the Philippines. This includes, but is not limited to, institutions such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and the European Union, and international civil society. We urge the UNHRC and the international community to act decisively on the systemic, state-sponsored, nationally coordinated red-tagging by the Marcos administration and its NTF-ELCAC prior to and during elections. We also call on the UN and the international community to actively pursue and endorse the recommendations of UN

Special Rapporteur Irene Khan, and to exert coordinated pressure on the Philippine government to end red tagging, enact legislation to prohibit and penalize it, and abolish the NTF-ELCAC. These steps are vital to restoring democratic space, enabling genuine peacebuilding, and protecting civil society from further harm.

### **Other Recommendations**

To effectively address and put a stop on the attacks against candidates and party-lists, the Mission calls for the repeal of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, the abolition of the NTF-ELCAC and the Anti-Terrorism Council, the criminalization of red-tagging, and the outlawing of private armies. It also calls for the return of the Philippine government to the International Criminal Court (ICC) as a critical step towards upholding IHL and ensuring accountability for current and future human rights violations. Rejoining the ICC would signal a genuine commitment to international criminal justice, strengthen domestic accountability mechanisms, and reinforce the rule of law essential for democratic governance.