

Peaceful Plebiscite Beckons Hope for New Citizens of the BARMM



CRITICAL EVENTS MONITORING SYSTEM (CEMS)
– EARLY RESPONSE NETWORK (ERN) BRIEF

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A quiet and peaceful exercise in democracy during the plebiscite for local statehood in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao's (BARMM) special geographic areas (SGA) stood in sharp contrast with the bloody and violent elections of 2023. This headline captures the reports of the Early Response Network (ERN) monitoring teams scattered across the SGA's 63 barangays.

People were excited as they queued as early as 6:00 AM to cast their votes in the plebiscite, an hour earlier than the official start of the voting. A significant number of the polling precincts finished early, with some recording more than 70% voter turnout as early as 10:00 AM, or five hours early than the closure of precincts at 3PM.

Except for a lone case of clan feuding in one barangay in Aleosan that affected voter turnout, and the noticeable refusal to vote of more than half of the voters in another barangay in Pigcawayan where a former top minister of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority resides, the overarching narrative was one of anticipation and excitement as both old and young voters celebrated the results.

Youth leaders interviewed by the ERN claimed victory for the peacefulness of the process and the overwhelming yes vote.

“We campaigned for participation and a yes vote to finally acquire development support in our areas and to test our ability to draw support for our advocacies for the forthcoming 2025 elections,” said Nasruddin Guiabar, a barangay youth leader in Midsayap.

Traditional leaders echoed the same theme. **“We gained no benefits from joining the BARMM in the first plebiscite, so we had to deliver on this second one to acquire the benefits that were denied to us,”** according to Buhare Kutea, a community leader in Kabacan. This perception comes after more than five years of being orphaned both by the Bangsamoro government and the North Cotabato province after voting “yes” to join the BARMM in the 2019 plebiscite.

Peace and stability were secured by the collaboration and overwhelming security presence of police, military, and local government officials in all villages—a lesson that must guide planning for the decisive and larger 2025 elections. It also helped that the entire process was placed in the hands of the Commission on Elections office of North Cotabato, outside BARMM—avoiding any perception of coercion and manipulation from vested political interests within the BARMM. ●



Residents of villages in North Cotabato waited over five years after they opted for inclusion to the Bangsamoro region to cast their vote in a plebiscite that will create the eight municipalities of the SGA. Photo courtesy of Early Response Network.