

NO SAFE VOTE: Gunfire, Fear, and Militarization Threaten the 2025 Polls in BARMM

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[Boto Bangsamoro](#)

As the nation heads towards the most decisive yet unpredictable election in a region reeling from decades of uncertainty, insecurity, and conflict, ***the demand for real-time, reliable, and accessible conflict information is immense.*** Today, Climate Conflict Action Asia (CCAA) introduces *Boto Bangsamoro*—***a dedicated election monitoring platform that fills the information gap and captures the dynamics of violence and conflict surrounding the 2025 midterm and parliamentary elections.***

Boto Bangsamoro offers an independent, conflict-focused lens—providing its own public-facing digest and data sets directly to media partners and policy stakeholders. ***It is CCAA’s distinctive contribution to the joint multi-stakeholder work of the Independent Election Monitoring Center (IEMC) that bridges state, non-state, and civil society efforts to ensure free, fair, and peaceful elections.***

It is grounded in CCAA’s longstanding Conflict Alert monitoring template that now incorporates a Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) and an Early Response Network (ERN) of partners that ***allows the delivery of timely, granular, and verified updates straight from communities across the Bangsamoro.***

While CCAA’s field reports feed into broader election monitoring efforts of the IEMC, it also ensures that ***CCAA’s analysis and data reaches end-users with the urgency, immediacy, and depth required for rapid response.*** This initiative is designed to serve as a trusted source of real-time reports with strong quality control features and a contextual analysis for media, stakeholders, and decision-makers during elections.

Starting with this release, CCAA digests will include a “moving picture” and thematic analysis of conflict patterns, violent strings, and actor behavior, accompanied by a detailed listing of incidents by municipality. ***On election day, Boto Bangsamoro will release reports every three hours (9 AM to 9 PM) to inform media, and humanitarian responders, and governance actors of emerging hotspots and security concerns.***

Succeeding the deadly 2023 barangay elections

This enhanced monitoring effort is warranted. ***We are entering a potentially catastrophic election season in the Bangsamoro region.*** In the 2023 village polls in the Bangsamoro (Barangay and Sangguniang Kabataan Elections (BSKE), 165 deaths were recorded between the July 3 filing of candidacy and the close of polls.

As of 9 May 2025, CEMS has already recorded 219 deaths since the filing of candidacy began on 1 October 2024—before the main election event and nearly all due to gun-related incidents. With conflict events multiplying in recent weeks, the risk of a far worse cycle of violence on election day is no longer speculative. It is imminent.

The dangerous setting is defined by three converging threats: ***(a) the porous and puny implementation of the gun ban, (b) the return of unauthorized checkpoints and voting blockades, and (c) an increasingly aggressive climate filled with voter intimidation and political bullying.***

The puny gun ban

An official gun ban has been imposed with no meaningful effect in curtailing the proliferation of illegal firearms. Checkpoints operated by military and police forces are visibly deployed across towns but lack such basic inspection tools as metal detectors. In Maguindanao del Sur, where the frequency of shooting incidents has been highest, a bomb exploded on May 4 outside the residential compound of a vice gubernatorial candidate in Buluan town, despite the area already being under COMELEC control. ***The presence of uniformed personnel has neither translated into meaningful enforcement of the gun ban nor has it dissuaded troublemakers from threatening people’s lives.***

Despite claims that the MILF will be prevented from using and carrying their weapons in public, rebel commanders, including some members of the BARMM parliament have been allowed to hold press conferences surrounded by hooded bodyguards carrying weapons and threatening armed attacks against their

political rivals. In February, authorities arrested and seized high-powered firearms from 17 MILF members in Maguindanao del Sur, but later released them without an explanation despite the ongoing election gun ban—sending a dangerous signal that rules could be bent or broken for powerful groups.

Unauthorized checkpoints and voting blockades

Meanwhile, visible signs of actions that deny the right of suffrage and promote unfair election practices witnessed in previous electoral exercises are resurfacing in 2025. In the barangay polls two years ago, unauthorized checkpoints erected by non-state armed groups blocked voters from reaching polling precincts and obstructed the transport of ballot boxes. CCAA's ERN reporters have raised the same red flags in volatile areas such as Shariff Aguak, where reports are circulating of an imminent lockdown to bar members of the UBJP political party from entering the town on election day. In Datu Odin Sinsuat, barangay officials from coastal areas are allegedly ordering residents not to vote in neighboring barangays.

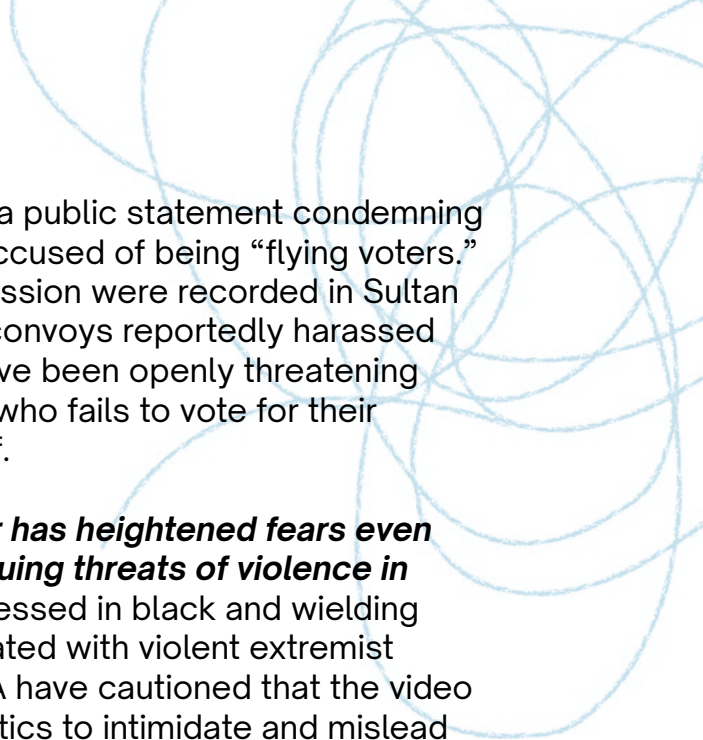
Unauthorized checkpoints manned by armed groups, some adjacent to municipal offices and police stations continue to operate. ***The presence of unauthorized checkpoints without punitive sanctions is often cited to accuse the government of collusion in creating an uneven playing field that favors one candidate against another, tarnishing the credibility of poll results and the COMELEC.***

Coercion and intimidation

Violence alone does not define the threat looming over the 2025 polls. ***A pervasive atmosphere of coercion, harassment, and psychological intimidation is sweeping across communities***—manifested in targeted killings, withdrawal of election officials, voter suppression through threats, and increasingly aggressive behavior by political supporters and armed groups.

On March 26, just two days before the official campaign period began, an election officer and her husband were shot and killed in Datu Odin Sinsuat—a chilling reminder of how early election violence emerged in contrast to previous years.

Consequently, as of May 7, thirty (30) teachers across BARMM have withdrawn from their election duties fearing for their safety. The Philippine National Police (PNP) has begun deploying substitute personnel, including 105 officers from Region 2 in Northern Luzon who will now serve as Special Electoral Boards.



On May 4, the Vice Mayor of Maguiling released a public statement condemning the physical assault of twenty (20) individuals accused of being “flying voters.” The same day, incidents of road rage and aggression were recorded in Sultan Kudarat and Datu Odin Sinsuat, where political convoys reportedly harassed drivers who refused to give way. Armed men have been openly threatening residents in Rajah Buayan, warning that anyone who fails to vote for their preferred candidate will have their hands cut off.

A video circulating online in the Lanao corridor has heightened fears even further. It shows three armed, masked men issuing threats of violence in Lanao del Sur should their candidates lose. Dressed in black and wielding rifles, their appearance echoes imagery associated with violent extremist groups. However, reliable field sources of CCAA have cautioned that the video may be a political ploy—using extremist aesthetics to intimidate and mislead communities.

Even the testing phase for automated vote-counting machines has not been spared. Final testing sites in Rajah Buayan (Maguindanao del Sur), Bayang, and Pualas (Lanao del Sur) have all been scenes of rising tensions and confrontations between opposing camps.

These flashpoints signify a troubling pattern of irascible behavior and total disrespect of the law unseen since the 1990s. ***Three days before election day, the entire region is showing signs not just of localized conflict, but of systemic and calculated efforts to suppress, control, or manipulate the vote—undermining the core promise of democratic participation in the Bangsamoro.***

BARMM at the crossroads

What is at stake now is trust. The spiraling violence—paired with unaddressed intimidation and an increasingly militarized election landscape—risks extinguishing the fragile belief that democratic processes in the Bangsamoro can deliver peace, representation, or meaningful change.

Militarization has become the default response to electoral violence, turning polling centers into de facto garrison states. When the ability to vote freely is compromised by fear, and when the only way to secure an election is through overwhelming military force, then we must ask: ***what kind of democracy are we defending?***

Across the region, voters are being forced to choose kinship over citizenship, survival over strategy. And in that choice—made under duress and amid threats—the very essence of democratic legitimacy begins to erode.

Call to action

In this volatile and rapidly deteriorating climate, urgent and decisive action is needed—not only to respond to specific incidents, but to uphold the integrity of the entire electoral process.

- (1) The most immediate priority must be the **strict and impartial enforcement of the election gun ban**. Clear operational standards for checkpoints such as the use of metal detectors must be observed, and police and military units must be equipped to detect and confiscate weapons. The unchecked circulation of firearms has made every political dispute a potential flashpoint. While COMELEC and security forces have announced intensified deployments, this must translate into meaningful enforcement—not just presence.
- (2) Just as urgent is the need to **publish a transparent list of COMELEC-authorized checkpoints**. This enables civil society, voters, and the media to distinguish legitimate enforcement operations from illegal blockades erected by armed groups. Unauthorized checkpoints—especially those designed to obstruct voter access or ballot transport—must be identified and dismantled immediately.
- (3) **COMELEC and security forces must uphold strict impartiality in the enforcement of policies and protocols**. In previous elections, questions about COMELEC’s credibility and perceived bias have undermined public confidence in the electoral process. To safeguard the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and prevent a failure of elections, the COMELEC must take concrete steps to demonstrate neutrality—such as preventing the midnight reshuffling of municipal election officers and ensuring full compliance with its own rules and regulations. Security forces must also be seen as impartial actors, not as instruments of political influence or intimidation. Their presence should reassure voters, not raise fears of bias or coercion.
- (4) Finally, monitoring mechanisms, ***including international monitoring bodies from countries heavily invested in the Bangsamoro transition, must be sensitive and respectful to local norms of behavior and avoid being sources of the same distrust and skepticism that could escalate flashpoints***. The current levels of aggression and intimidation demand constant coordination among local authorities, COMELEC, civil society, and security forces. Election monitors and quick-response teams must be empowered to intervene when tensions run high but to ***never substitute themselves as judges and arbiters of electoral processes and outcomes***.



The midterm elections in the Bangsamoro are a test of political maturity and a barometer of the success, or the lack of it, of the political settlement that created this new autonomous and devolved political authority.

The early markers of insecurity and instability from the rising violence confirms that the region now stands at a dangerous crossroad. Without immediate accountability, transparent enforcement, and community protection, this election may deepen rather than heal the wounds of conflict, ***Worse, it may fracture and fundamentally damage the credibility of the peace process itself.***

The Bangsamoro people deserve an election that reflects the will of its people, not the weight of its fears.

For inquiries and interviews, please contact:

Louise Marie Lara
Communications Manager
Climate Conflict Action
09178816238
llara@conflictaction.org

The Critical Events Monitoring System (CEMS) is an SMS- and high frequency radio-based reporting system that captures conflict incidents and tensions in communities in real-time. It is used by the Early Response Network (ERN), an independent group of men and women in various localities in the Bangsamoro, who share real-time information and work with local governments, key agencies, the security sector, and religious and traditional leaders in coordinating quick and context-specific responses to tensions, violent conflicts, disasters, and displacement, as they happen. The CEMS is now managed by the Climate Conflict Action (CCAA, formerly International Alert Philippines), a local organization focused on understanding the drivers of conflict and its interaction with climate risks for policy formulation, community strategies, and peacebuilding.