

Philippines' first electronic election seems successful

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Benedictine Sr. Mary John Mananzan, co-chairperson of the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines, navigates a Web site especially created for monitoring election-related incidents across the country in support for the Philippines bishops' election monitoring program, called Clean, Honest, Accurate, Meaningful and Peaceful, elections, or CHAMP. Officers of the Knights of Columbus and the poll watchdog group Kontra Daya look on, May 7.

Church bells pealed across the Philippines Monday morning to mark the beginning of voting in national elections, and Catholic bishops began the day with a special 6 a.m. Mass in Manila's cathedral to pray that the elections would be fair and peaceful.

By the end of the day with the official election commission reporting a voter turnout of around 75 percent, their prayers may have been answered.

For the first time, a computerized vote-counting system is being used, in an effort to stamp out the vote-rigging that has caused chaos in the past. Formerly, weeks could pass between election day and final results, as ballots were hand-counted and the results carried to the nation's capital from the thousands of far-flung islands that make up this archipelago.

Some 50 million people were registered to vote.

But the election was not without glitches and violence.

The leading candidate in early Philippine election results, Sen. Benigno Aquino III, was not able to cast his vote because an electronic voting machine malfunctioned. He, like thousands of others, had to wait four hours before finally casting his ballot.

In preliminary results posted late Monday night, Philippines time, Aquino had 8.96 million votes, or 41 percent of the ballots tallied in 57 percent of precincts. Former President Joseph Estrada, who was removed from office in 2001 on corruption charges, had 26 percent, and Manuel Villar, a senator and property magnate, had 14 percent. The Commission on Elections expects complete results within 72 hours.

Aquino's father was national hero Benigno S. Aquino Jr., who was assassinated by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, and his mother was the late Corazon Aquino, who became president after Marcos was toppled from office by a People Power revolution 1986.

Filipinos are electing a new president and vice president, as well 17,000 other positions from national to local offices.

Reuters news service reported that polling-day bomb and grenade attacks and shootings killed at least nine people with 12 wounded, the military said. The Los Angeles Times reported disruptions at more than 80 polling places, including bombings, shootouts, abductions and the burning of voting machines, plus at least half a dozen deaths.

But in a country long used to widespread election-related violence and intimidation, particularly on the southern island of Mindanao where Muslim and communist insurgencies have festered for years, Monday's casualty toll was seen as remarkably low.

Much of the violence was in Maguindanao province on Mindanao, where 57 people were killed in an election-related massacre last November, and on Basilan island.

Philippine police chief Director-General Jesus Verzosa said in a statement that the elections "will go down in our nation's history as probably the most peaceful and orderly political exercise ever held in our land."

Numerous Catholic organizations, including the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines, the Knights of Columbus, the National Secretariat for Social Action, poll watchdog Kontra Daya, and YouthPinoy joined the Philippines bishops' conference operation to monitor the election.

The bishop's program was called Operation CHAMP, or Clean, Honest, Accurate, Meaningful and Peaceful elections. Throughout election day, grass-roots groups gathered stories, commentaries, photos and video clips of events and incidents and sent them by fax, e-mail and text messaging to the CHAMP election monitoring page, hosted at the bishops' conference Web site.

Clifford Sorita, secretary general of the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting, told UCA News after six hours of voting that most complaints sent in were about the "birth pangs" of the nation's first automated elections.

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