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Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)

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Comelec's source code review highly-restricted – UP-based think tank

The software program that will run the automated election's 82,000 machines will not be trusted by voters unless Comelec allowed a real source code review.

The Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) thus warned today in response to Comelec's move to make the software program (source code) of the automated election system (AES) available for review by political parties and interested groups.

Bobby Tuazon, CenPEG's Director for Policy Studies, said that Comelec's "source code review" is not for real and the ground rules and restrictions it has set makes the activity a sham.

The review, according to Comelec, will be done under "controlled conditions" that are inconsistent with the spirit of the law (Sec. 12, RA 9369) which mandates the poll body for the prompt release of the source code for an independent review by citizens' groups and parties once an AES technology is selected for implementation.

At best, Comelec will allow only a "walk through" or, worse, a mere "presentation of the results" of the source code review supposedly done by the Colorado-based SysTest labs at a cost of P70 million, Tuazon said.

"This is not the kind of review we have asked for under Section 12 of RA 9369. The review looks just like a 'walk through' or worse, what the reviewers will see is just the 'results' of the source code review done by SysTest, which is under a different section of RA 9369," said Tuazon.

At least, Comelec should publicize the results of the "source code review" done by SysTest, he added.

Pablo Manalastas, CenPEG's IT consultant, said that Comelec's actions to restrict reviewers' access to the source code "is unfair to the Filipino people, and is not the correct implementation of Section 12 of RA 9369."

CenPEG is also concerned over a read-only copy of the source code to be provided on secured Comelec workstations.

Lito Averia, president of Philippine Computer Response Team and a convener of AES Watch, said that this particular guideline is a restriction and is "unacceptable."

"Reviewers would like to be able to tag portions of the code or insert comments as they review the code," Averia, an IT security systems expert, said. "This would not be possible if a read-only copy of the code is released for review. There is very little time left for the code review and Comelec should not be putting conditions that will in effect become hindrances to the review by interested public as provided in the law."

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CenPEG, a UP-based policy center, is the first group to ask for the release of the source code last May 2009. The request was approved by Comelec en banc the following month. Until today, however, the source code has not been released to CenPEG.

CenPEG had in August last year organized a pool of 30 IT professionals and academicians and offered to review the source code pro bono. It was estimated that a real source code review would take at least three months.

The source code is the human-readable version of the computer programs running on the PCOS and canvassing computers. It reveals the process or steps on how the computer will count the votes and accumulate them into canvasses.

“The source code review will allow us to check whether the process of counting and canvassing are done properly and in compliance with the law,” CenPEG’s IT consultants said.

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