

MONITORING ELECTION PREPARATIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY: AES WATCH ENGAGEMENTS

AES Watch, since its inception, provided the dynamics for various citizens' groups, people's organizations, institutions, and individuals for a timely, objective yet critical evaluation of the vulnerabilities and needed safeguards of the automated elections. While monitoring the AES system, what became a paramount concern is the promotion of voter's rights and the wider dissemination of studies and information to the electorate in the spirit of election transparency and accountability.

Overview of AES Watch

In mid-October 2009, groups and individuals who were part of 210 signatories to the joint appeal supporting the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) call to Comelec for the release of the source code informally convened themselves to form the Automated Election System (AES) Watch 2010. The AES Watch as formed is a voluntary, independent, and non-partisan broad coalition of concerned citizens' groups and individual leaders (mass leaders, social advocates, policy researchers and analysts, academics, lawyers, religious figures, youth-students, indigenous peoples and Muslim, IT and business professionals, and so on). They were bound by principles subscribing to clean and credible elections with transparency and accountability and are keen to be involved in monitoring the preparations for and conduct of the AES.

Its initial conveners included, CenPEG, the University of the Philippines Alumni Association (UPAA), National Secretariat for Social Action-Justice and Peace (NASSA-CBCP), De La Salle University College of Computer Studies (DLSU-CCS) caucus, National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP), Computer Professionals Union (CPU), Movement for Good Governance (MGG), the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP), Solidarity Philippines, Transparency International-Philippines, and the National Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP) AES Watch Youth, to name a few. Affiliated members of the groups came from across the country and overseas (particularly UPAA with its international chapters).

AES Watch (pronounced "eyes watch") was formally launched with more conveners and individual members on January 18, 2010 at Club Filipino, Greenhills, San Juan City where the citizens' watchdog's STAR (System Transparency, Accountability, and Readiness) Card assessment of election preparations was presented to the public and media.

Under AES Watch's Article of Unity¹, conveners will actively participate as a network of independent citizens groups in ensuring transparency and credibility in the AES and the May 2010 elections. AES Watch believed that one way of concretizing this mission is through tight monitoring of election preparations and the election day itself.

This came in the form of the STAR Card. The STAR Card itemized 20 areas of concern in various aspects of election preparation: (1) System Setup, (2) Internal Security and Trustworthiness, (3) Personnel Training & Voters' Education, and (4) Contingencies. Each area of concern was assessed accordingly as pass, fail or danger. The STAR Card thus became AES Watch flagship advocacy.

The STAR Card was a distillation of the collective minds of academics, IT and business scholars, social researchers, mathematicians, political analysts, and public administrators meeting in workshops and consultations.

The STAR Card

The STAR Card was first presented on December 17, 2009 during the Joint Congressional Oversight Committee-AES hearing at the Senate. Finding merit in the concerns raised by AES Watch, the JCOC asked the Comelec to answer these concerns. Since then, AES Watch convened regularly to deliberate on the items in the STAR Card before coming out with its first official assessment presented in public the following year on January 18. Shortly thereafter, the STAR assessment was presented to the annual assembly of Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). (CBCP came out with a public statement on the AES issues a few days later.) AES Watch's pool of experts and conveners consistently convened in the succeeding months leading to the elections to update the STAR Card ratings. In total, AES Watch updated the STAR Card five times: January 26, February 17, February 28, March 17 and April 23. The last STAR Card assessment before elections was publicly presented during the Multi-Stakeholders Assembly held at the De La Sale University on April 26, 2010.

The sixth and last assessment using the STAR Card format is included in this final report of EU-CenPEG Project 3030, with permission by AES Watch. (Please see the final report in the Appendix section of this report.)

Disseminating the STAR Card

Meantime, AES Watch conveners as well as other election watchdogs such as Namfrel and Lente used and disseminated the STAR Card in their own network of studies and forums. For instance, the De la Salle University - College of Computer Studies included the STAR card in their voter education module called "iVote" held in the different DLSU campuses in the Philippines. Likewise, the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG) also discussed the STAR Card among students of the University of the Philippines as part of their alternative classroom learning experience (ACLE), among others. Private organizations such as the Financial Executives Institute of the Philippines (FINEX) have also seen the STAR Card presentation courtesy of AES Watch conveners with networks in the business sector.

On May 8 or two days before the election, AES Watch presented the STAR Card to the People's International Observers Mission (PIOM) in a briefing orientation in Manila².

The STAR Card has also been posted on CenPEG's www.eu-cenpeg.com and on websites of other groups.

Other engagements

Aside from the STAR Card, AES Watch also actively engaged the Comelec through the series of JCOC hearings, and also in various forums, both private and covered by the media; small and large audiences.

AES Watch had consistently issued press releases in response to related issues as they arise. Official correspondences and notices were also sent to the Comelec, the JCOC, and the media for important events such as the STAR Card updates, participation at the JCOC hearing, and press conferences.

Moreover, AES Watch also supported important petitions such as the petition calling for a genuine source code review on February 19, 2010. This petition followed shortly after Comelec's announcement of a source code review which, after careful assessment, was concluded to be too restrictive in time and method. In this petition, AES Watch joined not only the citizens' organizations but also the political parties. And on March 23, in a press conference hosted by CBCP, AES Watch signed the joint concern and call for greater vigilance together with Namfrel, CBCP, DLSU-College of Computer Science and Kontra Daya.

After the elections, AES Watch echoed CenPEG's call for an independent and impartial appraisal of the May 10 automated elections. This was followed later by a statement asking Comelec for the disclosure of all election materials as a matter of public information and in assessing the conduct of the automated elections.

AES Watch on the ground

Aside from monitoring via the STAR Card, AES Watch concretized election monitoring through participation in the mock elections where AES Watch volunteers went on the ground to observe at close range the activity. AES Watch teams were deployed at the New Era Elementary School in Taguig City and Maharlika High School in Taguig City.

As the election neared, AES Watch joined a broad coalition of different citizen groups called the Citizen Election Monitoring Group (CEMG), which aimed to monitor and map the different happenings on election day through the development of participatory websites. The CEMG is composed of people behind 100araw.com, electionexchange.ph, voterreportph.org and Google Philippines, among others.

On the part of AES Watch, it utilized the “Ushahidi crowdsourcing information software” that can be accessed at aeswatch.org through the support of Eastern Telecommunications.

Synthesis

Because of the STAR Card's comprehensive yet straight to the point approach, it slowly gained appeal to the different groups that wanted to monitor the elections but don't know where or how to start. Subsequently, AES Watch was not only sought after for the STAR Card but, through the tri-media, for their insights and opinions on various election-related issues.

Many groups have adopted the STAR Card approach, albeit modified in such a way that would highlight their respective organization's concern. The STAR Card thus provided a framework for monitoring the preparations for the automated elections, which then helped in analyzing its outcome. More importantly, AES Watch had actively engaged the different stakeholders, from the Comelec, JCOC, citizens organizations and the voters' themselves.

As a result, AES Watch was able to expand its role not just as the purveyors of the STAR Card, but as genuine advocates for a transparent and credible election.

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End Notes

- 1 Released on January 18, 2010
- 2 Consisting of 89 foreign observers from the U.S., Europe, and Asia the PIOM observed the automated elections in various regions.