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Research Article

Guardians of Democracy: Exploring the Feasibility and Viability of Organizing Police Task Forces in Philippine Election Hotspot Areas

Angelito M. Dangli, Jr

Philippine College of Criminology, Graduate School

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*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

angelitodanglijr@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Election-related violence is one of the threats to democratic governance. This is evident in some provinces in the Philippines due to intimidation, political competition, and institutional weaknesses. While there have been studies about the issue of security during the election process from the campaign period until the proclamation of winners, no research has discussed what happens after the election. Questions on how inter-agency coordination, witness protection, accountability, and investigation measures continue after the disbandment of election task forces are yet to be answered by the gap in the literature. One of the important issues regarding governance is thus how public safety beyond election day can be maintained effectively.

This study sought to investigate the feasibility, effectiveness, acceptability, sustainability, and long-term viability of creating police task forces in election hotspots in the provinces of Abra and Cagayan. Data were collected using qualitative research through key informant interviews and focus group discussions with police investigators, COMELEC field officials, victims, witnesses, and community stakeholders. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

The findings indicate that police task forces were indeed effective in reducing visible forms of election-related violence through the deployment of additional police personnel, patrols, checkpoints, monitoring of intelligence, and the conduct of police operations, like the implementation of search warrants and arrest of wanted persons. Their sustainability, however, was hampered by witness intimidation, political pressure, lack of coordination among government institutions, and the temporary nature of task-force deployment. Participants constantly narrated how the disbanding of task forces after each election led to ineffective investigations, lack of intelligence monitoring, poor protection of victims, witnesses, and their family members, and lack of accountability. All community stakeholders have supported the creation of an institutionalized and sustainable national system for election security, which will monitor,

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investigate, prosecute election-related crimes, and provide protection for victims and witnesses for the whole election period. The study aims to fill a major governance gap as it proves that not only addresses election-related violence but also sustains institutional accountability after elections. To this end, this study offers the Resilient Permanent Election Task Force Framework, which is an evidence-based governance model for the promotion of institutional resilience, inter-agency coordination, public trust, and prevention of election-related violence in the Philippines.

Keywords: *Election Hotspots, Election Security, Election-Related Violence, Institutional Resilience, Police Task Force, Post-Election Accountability*

Introduction

Elections are fundamental institutions of democratic governance because they provide people with the opportunity to select their leaders, participate in public decision-making, and hold government officials accountable. The integrity of electoral processes, however, depends not only on the conduct of voting but also on the existence of a secure environment that allows citizens to exercise their political rights to vote freely and without fear. Globally, election-related violence, intimidation, and political coercion continue to threaten democratic stability, particularly in areas characterized by political competition, weak institutions, and historical patterns of conflict (International IDEA, 2023; United Nations Development Programme UNDP, 2023).

In the Philippines, election-related violence remains a persistent concern despite the implementation of extensive security measures and inter-agency coordination mechanisms involving the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), the Philippine National Police (PNP), and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Election-related incidents such as political killings, armed confrontations, intimidation, vote-buying, and threats against candidates, election workers, and community members continue to be reported, particularly in areas classified as Election Areas of Concern (EACs) (COMELEC, 2023; PNP, 2025). These incidents not only threaten public safety but also undermine electoral integrity, weaken public confidence in democratic institutions, and hinder the effective administration of justice. Moreover, the need to strengthen

election security is consistent with the national development agenda of the Philippines. The Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023–2028 emphasizes the importance of ensuring public order and safety through stronger law enforcement, enhanced crime prevention strategies, and improved justice-sector performance to promote safe, secure, and resilient communities (National Economic and Development Authority [NEDA], 2023).

Likewise, Ambisyon Natin 2040 envisions a peaceful and secure society where citizens can fully participate in democratic processes without fear of violence, intimidation, or insecurity (NEDA, 2016). These national priorities highlight the importance of developing sustainable and effective mechanisms for addressing election-related security threats.

Within this context, the provinces of Abra and Cagayan have been identified during recent electoral cycles as areas requiring heightened election security interventions because of political rivalries, localized power structures, and recurring election-related incidents (COMELEC, 2023; PNP, 2025). To address these concerns, police task forces are routinely organized to prevent violence, conduct intelligence gathering, respond to election-related threats, and support law enforcement operations during election periods. While these task forces play a critical role in maintaining peace and order, they are generally temporary in nature and are often activated only during the election period. Consequently, questions arise regarding their feasibility, effectiveness, acceptability, sustainability, and long-term

viability in addressing recurring election security challenges.

Existing literature and official reports have primarily focused on election laws, security protocols, hotspot classifications, and post-election assessments (COMELEC, 2023; PNP, 2025; UNDP, 2023). Similarly, studies on election security have largely examined patterns of electoral violence, governance issues, and institutional responses to election-related conflicts (International IDEA, 2023; UNDP, 2023). However, limited attention has been given to the actual experiences of those directly involved in or affected by the implementation of election security mechanisms. In particular, the perspectives of police investigators, comelec field officer, victims, witnesses, and community stakeholders remain insufficiently explored despite their critical role in understanding how election security measures operate in practice and how these mechanisms may be improved.

Furthermore, while existing studies provide valuable insights into election-related violence and security management, there remains a limited understanding of the factors that influence the sustainability and long-term viability of police task forces in election hotspot areas. Little is known about how stakeholders perceive their effectiveness, what operational challenges affect their performance, and how institutional arrangements can be strengthened to ensure continuity of investigations, witness protection, monitoring, and prosecution beyond election periods. This gap in knowledge is particularly significant in hotspot areas where election-related threats often persist before, during, and after elections. To address these gaps, this study explores the lived experiences and perspectives of police investigators, COMELEC field officials, victims, witnesses, and community stakeholders regarding the organization and operation of police task forces in election hotspot areas in the Philippines. Specifically, the study examines their experiences in the establishment and operation of task forces, the challenges encountered in reporting and responding to election-related incidents, the perceived effectiveness and acceptability of task-force operations, and the factors

influencing their sustainability and long-term viability.

Guided by Institutional Resilience Theory, the study seeks to understand how election security mechanisms can adapt, sustain operations, and maintain effectiveness in environments characterized by recurring political tensions and security risks.

Methodology

Research Design

This study applied a qualitative research approach in exploring the feasibility, effectiveness, acceptability, sustainability, and viability of police task forces in the Philippines' election hotspots. This qualitative research design was suitable for this study as it sought to investigate the experiences and perceptions of people directly engaged in election security measures and those affected by election issues. Using this approach, the study gained insight into how election security measures worked and what made them both effective and sustainable.

Research Method

This study used Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

KIIs provided participants an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences concerning election security operations, election management, crime investigations, and election issues.

FGDs provided an opportunity to collect views on issues relating to election security and to engage in interactive discussion among participants concerning their experiences and suggestions regarding election security.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Since this study employed the Reflexive Thematic Analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2021), the researcher reflected on his positionality during the whole research process. Prior to carrying out this study, the researcher had professional experience in police operations and election security, being part of police task forces related to elections and police operations, which could provide him contextual knowledge but, at the same time, could affect his interpretation of the data.

Self-reflection was purposely incorporated throughout data collection and analysis to minimize researcher's bias. During the conduct of interviews and focus group discussions, participants were encouraged to express their experiences freely without being influenced by the personal views of the researcher and/or his being a police officer. To accommodate the perspective of the participants open-ended questioning, active listening, and neutral probing techniques were constantly employed.

The researcher maintained awareness by continuously examining personal assumptions, documenting analytic decisions, comparing interpretations across participant groups, and ensuring that themes were grounded in the narratives of the participants rather than preconceived expectations throughout the coding and theme development process. To further strengthened interpretive credibility the researcher includes the diverse stakeholder perspectives by allowing emerging themes to be examined from multiple institutional and community viewpoints.

Population of the Study

The study was conducted in the provinces of Abra and Cagayan, both identified as election areas of concern because of consistent political tensions, recurring election-related violence, and security challenges during previous election periods.

A total of twenty-nine (29) participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement and experience of election-related incidents. Participants were drawn from four stakeholder groups to achieve data triangulation and ensure balanced representation of multiple perspectives: Police investigators, responsible for investigating election-related offenses; COMELEC field officials, directly involved in election security coordination and administration; Victims and witnesses who experienced election-related violence or intimidation; and Community stakeholders, knowledgeable about election security conditions within their respective communities.

The inclusion of these stakeholder groups allowed the study to examine election security

from community perspectives, operational, institutional, and victim-centered, hence, strengthening the credibility and depth of the findings.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were included if they: were at least 18 years old, had direct involvement, substantial knowledge or experience regarding election-related violence or security operations, were willing to voluntarily participate and provide informed consent, and were emotionally and physically capable of participating in interviews or focus group discussions.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants were excluded if they: had no direct knowledge or involvement relevant to election-related incidents, were below 18 years of age, withdrew or declines informed consent, or were considered unable to participate because of emotional distress or other circumstances that could compromise their well-being or the quality of the data.

Purposive sampling was employed to enabled the researcher to select participants capable of providing rich and relevant information directly related to the objectives of the study.

Data Gathering Tools

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection instrument.

Separate interview guides were prepared for police investigators, COMELEC field officials, victims and witnesses, and community stakeholders to ensure that questions were appropriate to each role and experiences of the participant groups.

The open-ended questions of the interview guides focused on: organization and deployment of police task forces, operational effectiveness, acceptability within communities, sustainability and long-term viability, operational challenges, and recommendations for improving election security.

The interview guides were evaluated by experts in police operations, election security,

election laws, criminology, public administration, and qualitative research to establish content validity. Their recommendations were incorporated before the conduct of interviews.

Data Gathering Procedures

Before the data collection process, the researcher acquired the approval from the PCCR graduate school, PNP, COMELEC, victims, witnesses, and community stakeholders. The informants were recruited via purposive sampling and were provided information on the objectives and purposes of the study as well as its benefits.

Informed written consent was acquired from all informants before the conduct of interviews and discussions. Key informant interviews were performed one-on-one in places convenient and safe for the informants. The interview took about forty-five to sixty minutes to complete. Focus group discussions were then held among informant groups to get additional views and to discuss their common experiences.

With the consent of the participants, interviews and discussions were recorded to provide accuracy in transcribing the data collected. Notes were taken during the fieldwork process as well to make sure that all relevant information is documented. When saturation was already reached the data collection was stopped.

Treatment of Data

The study utilized Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis to examine the data.

The examination adhered to the six iterative stages of Reflexive Thematic Analysis: immersing oneself in the data via multiple readings of transcripts, methodically creating preliminary codes, developing candidate themes from interconnected codes, evaluating and honing themes in relation to the entire dataset, articulating and labeling themes, and crafting the conclusive analytical narrative.

To aligned with the reflexive characteristics of the approach, coding and theme formulation were perceived as informative rather than merely procedural. Themes emerged from ongoing interaction

with the data, persistent comparison of participant cohorts, and reflective scrutiny of analytical choices. To guarantee that the results are accurate and reflects the faithful representation experiences of the participants, citations were incorporated to support and exemplify the analysis.

Ethical Consideration

The study complied with ethical standards. Involvement of participant was completely optional and they were duly informed of their entitlement to refuse participation or retract their involvement at any point without consequences.

The study did not use personal identification but rather each participant was given a code to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The interview transcripts, audio recordings and study documents were archived and were only available to the researcher.

Additional protections were implemented because of the involvement of victims and witnesses of election-related violence. Interviews were conducted in private and secure locations, participants were not required to answer questions that caused emotional discomfort, and interviews were discontinued if participants wished to stop their involvement.

The selection of the participants was made solely based on the inclusion criteria of the study and their relevance to the research objectives to ensure fairness and impartiality.

The results will be shared via academic conferences, journals, and suitable reports to pertinent governmental institutions and stakeholders to facilitate evidence-informed enhancements in election security practice and policy.

Results and Discussion

Feasibility and Viability of Organizing Police Task Forces in Election Hotspot Areas

The study illustrates that it is institutionally feasible to deploy police task forces in election-sensitive areas because the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) have pre-existing legal authorities, operational

standards, and inter-agency coordination frameworks. Participants from various sectors consistently expressed the activation of the election task force as a well-established organizational protocol that can be quickly deployed once municipalities are identified as areas of electoral importance. Existing security frameworks, operational plans, and command systems ensure the rapid deployment of personnel, intelligence capabilities, and logistical resources in response to increased electoral vulnerabilities.

The police investigators said that election task teams are activated through a formal command structure whenever the COMELEC identifies hotspot areas. As one investigator explained (PIA-1), task teams are usually organized at the orders from the Regional Office when the COMELEC identifies critical hotspot locations. An Election Task Group is created, made up of investigative, operations, intelligence, and mobile units that follow a hierarchical command system.

PIA-2, PIC-1, PIC-2, FGD-PIA-2, and FGD-PIA-4 shared similar findings that established cooperation and operational directions between the PNP and COMELEC allow the timely organization and deployment of election security teams. COMELEC representatives further admitted that the creation of election task forces strengthens security after the hotspot classifications are declared. However, they frequently pointed out that operational intensification usually starts once threats have manifested or communities have been officially recognized as election area of concern. According to an Election Field Officer (CEA-1): "Once task forces were dissolved, the regular monitoring of politically motivated issues was reduced." This lapse could be exploited by individuals with political ties causing the intelligence collected during the elections to be wasted.

This was further confirmed by victims and community stakeholders. They observed strong police intervention after sensational election-related incidents but also noted lack of sustained security operations before the violence occurred. One victim (VW-1) said: "Yes, after the incident, the police created a task force to undertake an investigation." They

conducted in-depth investigation, took the statement of witnesses, gather pieces of evidence, and filed criminal complaint against the suspect/s.

These stories show that the current system of election security has significant organizational capability in terms of responding immediately after the election-related violence has been identified. However, the participants have consistently described election security as being reactive in nature, with organizational response being based either on or actual instances of violence or hotspot designation.

This tendency reflects a trend with studies about election security. The United Nations Development Programme (2023) states that effective election security requires institutional procedures that are operational throughout the whole electoral process rather than depending on the deployment of temporary security forces during election period. Likewise, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2022) stated that resilient election security is based on continuous collaboration of government institutions and permanent institutional structures. All of these studies reflect the experiences of the participants that while the rapid deployment of task forces during elections worked practically, it was institutionally insufficient.

Batalla (2021) stated that election security efforts have concentrated primarily on ensuring security during election day. Limited attention given by government institution in investigating unresolved election-related crimes after the proclamation of winners, preventing future conflicts between political clans and ensuring accountability of those involved. Reports from Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (2023, 2025) show how the province of Abra suffered from recurring election periods of political violence caused by warring political families and existing political structures. This illustrate how election-related threats are not just a one-day event but are part of the continuing political war between political clans and their associates that continues before and after the elections. Philippine National Police reports (2025) likewise indicate that many election-

related violence arise from prolonged political conflicts rather than isolated campaign incidents.

This can be better understood through the experiences of the participants in Abra and Cagayan. While others perceive electoral violence as occasional, said participants view it as an ongoing issue of governance. In both provinces, the participants observed that the security actions would increase only after a certain municipality has been identified as an election area of concern or after violent actions. Hence, the current election security strategy is able to respond to crises but not to prevent them from happening.

Through Institutional Resilience Theory, the main limitation of the present election task forces lies in their inability to maintain continuity of action especially in the aspect of investigation and protection of victims, witnesses and their family members, anticipate, and learn from experiences rather than in their ability to react quickly to election-related violence. Boin, et.al (2021) stated that a resilient government is one capable of sustaining always its best performance. Present task forces undermine this factor of resilience since after the proclamation of winners' election operation stops. This results in discontinuation of investigation, intelligence monitoring, protection of victims and witnesses, reduced coordination of government institutions involved in election security operations, and the loss of institutional memory needed to address election-related incidents.

Therefore, the findings further advance the theory of Institutional Resilience in the realm of election security by proving that the establishment of resilience does not involve merely the rapid operational deployment of personnel. Rather, such a resilience depends on institutional capacities to continue the conduct of investigation, witness protection measures, intelligence activities, and coordination between government institutions throughout the whole electoral process. Thus, it is not the question of feasibility of establishing police task forces that remains the key governance problem. Instead, it is the matter of translating what is feasible but reactive approach into an institutionalized structure of permanent

nature aimed at preventing election-related violence through continuity and accountability. This governance problem serves as an empirical ground for the recommended concept of Resilient Permanent Election Task Force Framework.

Effectiveness and Acceptability of Organized Police Task Forces

The findings indicate that police task forces were perceived to be efficient in maintaining a peaceful and orderly situation during election period due to their visible presence, patrol operations, checkpoints, and security oversight. In Abra and Cagayan, where political tensions and risk of election violence heightened public anxiety, the presence of police personnel was a security strategy and a clear statement of the commitment of the government to conduct a peaceful and orderly election. The experiences shared by the participants suggest that presence of police personnel prevented criminal acts and restored public trust during politically sensitive times.

The related literature also supports these findings by consistently acknowledging the significance of visible security deployment in election security management. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe–Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR, 2022) states that a competent and visible police force can prevent violence during elections and promote people's trust in the integrity of the process. Similarly, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES, 2022) mentions that the planned deployment of the election security forces lifts voter confidence backs up the COMELEC field officers, and helps create a safe environment for participating in the democratic process without any form of fear or intimidation. These observations are reflective of the experiences of the participants, who unanimously agreed that the visible presence of police personnel can help prevent any kind of violence.

COMELEC (2023) said that the increased deployment of election security forces during the 2022 National and Local Elections improved the perception of safety of the community and those actually serving the

election process, like COMELEC field officials, NAMFREL, and poll workers particularly in areas where the COMELEC declared as election area of concern or are considered to be election hotspots. Further, reports of the PNP (2024; 2025) indicate that the strategic placement of election security forces, PNP and AFP have been helpful in minimizing election-related violence due persistent presence of the security forces in checkpoints and joint mobile patrols. These claims were supported by studies conducted by Batalla (2021), the trust in the election security forces is increased as police personnel become responsive and active in engaging the community during the electoral process. Furthermore, Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (2023; 2025) stated that in areas where there is political instability the presence of the security forces reduces the fear among the community and increases their trust in the capability of the PNP and AFP to maintain public safety.

From the perspective of Institutional Resilience Theory, the results show that the display of a large election security forces is indicative not only of the reactive response to the current problems of election-related violence in terms of security; at the same time, the results show the ability of the government to maintain its legitimacy, stability and assurance in the face of political instability. The evidence of institutional resilience not only requires the quick deployment of the security forces but also shows the assurance of the community about the ability of the PNP and AFP to maintain peace and order. In the context of Abra and Cagayan, the increased presence of the security forces ensured the legitimacy of the institution through ensuring the greater presence of the government institutions during the electoral period. The participants noted that the legitimacy was particularly observable during the electoral period but diminished after the proclamation of winners.

However, the findings reveal some major limitations of the use of police visibility. It has been noted by the participants that whereas police patrols and checkpoints have been quite effective in reducing any overt violence during elections, they have not proved to be very effective in controlling the covert forms of

violence like intimidation, vote buying, coercion, and other forms of election-related violence. These covert activities are usually committed in private areas where there is no scope for the visibility of police and where success is dependent on community cooperation, intelligence gathering, and witness participation rather than on routine patrol operations and police visibility alone.

In conclusion, the above findings suggest that the effectiveness of police task forces cannot be measured by their ability to mitigate visible election-related incidence throughout the electoral period. Whereas the observed deployment is an essential component of election security, effective public safety requires systems that will be able to counter both open and hidden threats throughout the election process from start to finish and beyond. The participant experiences reveal one major governance gap, which is that while current election task forces are able to ensure instant security during elections, they lack proper structures to help with post-election monitoring, witness protection, intelligence collection, and accountability. This gap forms a strong empirical case for the proposed resilient permanent election task force framework.

Factors Influencing Sustainability and Long-Term Viability

One of the main findings of this study is that for election security to be sustainable, the successful application of police operations during elections cannot suffice as it is necessary for the COMELEC and PNP to have the ability to sustain security operations after the election. Participants repeatedly identified five interrelated factors affecting the sustainability of election security programs: sustained operation, adequate and sustained funding, institutional independence, interagency coordination, and extended protection of witnesses and victims. These factors, rather than being independent operational considerations, affect the ability of the government to sustain accountability and ensure that election issues continue to be prioritized after the proclamation of winners.

The absence of institutional consistency regarded by the participants as the main

challenge to achieving sustainable election security. At present, task forces are created before the start of these elections and when election-related violence occurs and dissolved after the proclamation of winners; this leads to the fact that personnel of said task forces go back to their former units or re-deployed, investigation and intelligence work stops, and gradually there is no more attention paid to election-related issues from the COMELEC and PNP. Even though investigations may last for many periods, the temporary structure that allows them to take place gets dissolved once the elections are formally finished. Inconsistency leads to problems with oversight, reduces the drive to investigate and the reliability of assistance in prosecution and testimony. It becomes evident that the biggest deficiency of the current approach to election security is the inability of concerned institutions to be responsible after the election.

The participants also understood the importance of resource sustainability for sustained efficiency. Despite the fact that there was clear evidence of the commitment shown by election security forces in discharging their duties and responsibilities related to securing the elections, they constantly identified lack of trained personnel in the field of election matters, limited logistics and lack of funds as some of the factors that have affected their efficiency. Such limiting factors have affected the processes of protection of witnesses, prolonged investigation, intelligence gathering, transport, and judicial processes particularly in far flung areas.

The recurring theme in this discussion is the need for institutional independence. Participants from different backgrounds consistently associate institutional effectiveness with respect to election security with the principle of independence of the different institutions involved in election matters especially the PNP from political influence. The interference of politics in operational decisions, appointments of Chiefs of Police and Provincial/City Directors, and investigations undermined trust and cooperation from victims and witnesses. It was emphasized by participants that the legitimacy of government institutions, like the COMELEC, PNP and AFP rests on the ability of the election

security organization to operate independently of political concerns and at the same time remain professionally neutral and non-partisan in politics.

The findings further highlight the importance of inter-agency collaboration in sustaining electoral security. Election security was seen as a shared responsibility of governance which would require sustained collaboration between the COMELEC, PNP, AFP, prosecutors, courts, national and local government agencies, and other community stakeholders. During electoral cycles, existing systems of coordination usually facilitated the flow of strategy building, intelligence, and security forces operation. However, the participants constantly observed that such collaboration systems would weaken after elections and cause poor follow-up investigation, lack of protection to victims and witnesses and fragmented information sharing. Hence, sustained collaboration between concerned government institutions became a necessity for sustaining election security.

Ultimately, all participants emphasized the need for continued protection of victims and witnesses to guarantee sustainability of the accountability process. Confusion over support from the PNP and fear of reprisals have made some victims and many witnesses reluctant to get involved in the legal process. Without the existence of such protection, the willingness of victims and witnesses to become involved in the judicial process became much lower which made the gathering of pieces of evidence difficult for the police investigators and made prosecution less likely to occur.

The results have been thoroughly proven by relevant literature and research. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2023), sustainable election security depends on the existence of the durable institutional environment characterized by enough funding, interagency collaboration, preventive measures and continuous supervision, rather than temporary election interventions. Likewise, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (2023) stresses that election security is contingent upon solid criminal justice institutions which are able to ensure protection of victims and witnesses, and conduct of thorough

investigations of all election-related crimes after the election period.

Previous studies by International IDEA (2021), Daxecker et al. (2020), and Birch & Muchlinski (2020) show that the sustainability of election security is achieved through the establishment of sustainable institutional environment, professional independence, collaborative governance and most importantly continuous funding.

Consistent with Institutional Resilience Theory (Boin et al., 2021), it shows that resilience does not only depend on responding immediately to election-related crimes but also on the capability of the government institutions involved in election security operations to coordinate, adapt, learn, and sustain its operations. The participants stated that there is already a framework from the PNP and AFP to respond to any election-related incident. However, said framework lacks a similar set up in conducting investigations and overseeing the entire process of elections. This means there is definitely a big problem in the present election security system. Thus, there is practical proof presented by this study on why the Resilient Permanent Election Task Force Framework should be adopted in order to create a permanent, well-funded, nationally organized, and coordinated election security policy that protect the victims, witnesses and their family members from retaliation from political clans, conduct of continuous investigation, intelligence, prosecution and coordination from other government institutions the entire electoral process and beyond.

Challenges Encountered in Organizing Police Task Forces

From the findings, it is apparent that the challenges experienced in organizing police task forces extend beyond operational responsibilities and represent more complex organizational and governance challenges that affect the sustainability of election security. The participants have consistently identified intertwined challenges such as political interference, victims and witness reluctance, logistical constraints, and reduced organizational cooperation among police

investigation efforts, COMELEC field officers, victims, witnesses, and other community stakeholders. In contrast to isolated challenges, the challenges reinforce one another, thus, reducing the effectiveness of electoral security organizations in conducting investigations, preventing violence, and ensuring accountability.

One of the most persistent barriers mentioned by the participants was the fear of reprisal among witnesses and even victims. Thus, their reluctance to cooperate with police investigators. It was agreed unanimously by the participants that a number of electoral offenses are left unreported because of the fear of the community concerning retaliation from politically influential families, private armed groups or their political associates. Police investigators pointed out that the investigation becomes very difficult to pursue when witnesses refuse to submit their affidavits or testify in court as there is no evidence available for the criminal cases. While other individuals who were affected and other witnesses mentioned safety of themselves and their families as one of the major reasons for their reluctance to reveal information, it was observed by the community stakeholders that many individuals have relevant information concerning election-related violence but they do not say anything for avoiding any risk to themselves. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of election security is the existence of credible and sustained victim and witness protection that encourage community cooperation.

One important barrier that was observed by all participants is the effect of politics in influencing the functioning of electoral security. The participants have observed that the influence of politics is not only done through directives but also through expectations, professional advancements of PNP senior officers, and sense of duty. Police investigators explained how politically influential clans and political situations in some municipalities or province can hamper decision-making and also professional neutrality. The COMELEC field officers identified that the political connections of the PNP hampered inter-agency trust and

coordination of election security. The victims, witnesses and community stakeholders further emphasized the link between political power and fear, decreased trust in the judicial process, and decreased willingness to cooperate with the police.

Participants also identified operational constraints as a recurring challenge to achieving efficient election security. Police officers identified a number of constraints, including a shortage of trained personnel to investigate election-related incidents, inadequate logistical supports, limited communication networks, and insufficient funding for follow-up investigation, which limited their ability to maintain a prolonged presence, conduct thorough investigation to gather pieces of evidence and pursued victim/s and witnesses to execute sworn affidavit. In many cases, these problems arose due to geographical isolation of communities which made it difficult for police officers to cover long distances in such isolated areas, as well as lack of necessary communication facilities. COMELEC field officers confirmed that although coordination mechanisms between different government agencies were working effectively in most cases, operational constraints made it difficult to implement them in practice. Community stakeholders also pointed out that delayed responses were often caused by organizational constraints and not lack of commitment on the part of election security forces.

In addition, the findings revealed a post-election challenge: the weakening of institutional cooperation. While interagency cooperation between the PNP, COMELEC, AFP, local government units, among others, was considered efficient during the time of elections, participants all pointed out that investigation, communications, intelligence sharing, joint monitoring, and election-related activities declined immediately after election operations ceased. This deterioration of cooperation affected ongoing investigations, protection to witnesses, and resolution of election-related cases. Participants mentioned that although there were mechanisms for coordination during elections, these lacked any institutional structures for sustaining cooperation throughout the political cycle.

The findings of this study are consistent with the existing literature and research. The United Nations Development Programme (2023) stated that good governance, sustainable election security requires stable institutions, and proactive strategies as opposed to temporary operational efforts. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) emphasized too, that sustained election security requires synchronization of criminal justice institutions capable of sustaining investigations, witness and victim protection, and accountability of public officers beyond the election period. OSCE/ODIHR (2022) stressed the importance of inter-agency cooperation and information sharing. International IDEA (2021), Daxecker et al. (2020), and Birch and Muchlinski (2020) stated that preventing election-related violence is more effective when there are strong victim and witness protection, fundings, professional independence, and institutional continuity.

The findings of the study in relation to the theory of Institutional Resilience (Boin et al., 2021) revealed that the challenges affecting election security are rooted not only in the implementation deficiencies but more on institutional weaknesses. Current policies show the readiness of the COMELEC, PNP, and AFP to respond immediately during election periods. However, there is lacking in organizational capacity, collaborative governance, and support from other government institutions to sustain the conduct of investigation, intelligence, protection of witnesses, victims and their family members, and accountability of police senior officers and COMELEC officials after elections. This institutional gap explains the reason why many criminal cases lose momentum even when initial actions of the PNP have been successful. Thus, the need for Resilient Permanent Election Task Force Framework that would sustain continuous conduct of investigation until resolution of cases, victim, witness and their family members protection, coordination of election related operations, and accountability before, during, and after every election periods.

Proposed Program to Enhance Effectiveness, Sustainability, and Long-Term Viability

The findings indicate that in order to improve election security, the development of procedures not only at the time of elections but also the establishment of an institution that will be able to provide security, accountability, and transparency throughout the election process is needed. The participants unanimously pointed out that the limitations in the present election task forces rooted mainly in their temporary and reactive organizational structure which weakens the continuity and effectiveness of election security efforts.

Among the most important recommendations which were drawn from the study was the institutionalization of a permanent election task force. Police investigators continually argued that the creation of such a permanent body would facilitate continuity, information gathering and consistency in investigation, and empowered police officers to develop some expertise in election security operations. Instead of creating and dissolving temporary task forces during every electoral process, the participants felt that a permanent task force would be able to remain ready prior, during and after the elections. The COMELEC field officers agreed, emphasizing that permanent institutional arrangements would strengthen long-term planning, inter-agency coordination, and continuity of investigation beyond the election period.

The participants also emphasized the importance of establishing a comprehensive and sustained victim and witness protection system. The victims and witnesses agreed that protection should continue after election day and even beyond into the process of the investigation, prosecution, and trial of crimes committed during the elections. Police investigators recognized that successful investigations depend largely on the cooperation of the victims and witnesses although the community stakeholders added that the fear of reprisals is one of the main reasons why election-related crimes go unreported. The participants therefore suggested the creation of special teams for the purposes of protecting witnesses and victims,

monitoring of cases, and coordination with the Department of Justice.

Another important recommendation was the creation of an integrated election security interagency framework. All participants regarded the problem of violence associated with elections as a difficult problem that could only be addressed through sustained collaboration among the PNP, COMELEC, Department of Justice, AFP, Intelligence Community and Community Stakeholders. The creation of sustainable frameworks of investigation, prosecution support, information exchange, collaboration, and oversight throughout the process was recommended instead of limiting collaboration solely during the election period.

The participants highlighted the importance of strong and consistent institutional backing as another critical component for ensuring sustainable election security. They stressed the importance of allocating continuous and exclusive funding for election security operations, training of election security personnel, modern communication and intelligence systems, monitoring of election hotspot areas and organizational measures to ensure that operational decisions made will not be insulated by political influence. These were considered important as institutional resilience is based on consistency and capacity of the institution backed by well-trained personnel, technical, logistical resources and enough funding and not through operational mobilization alone.

Together, these recommendations provide the empirical basis of the proposed Resilient Permanent Election Task Force Framework. While present election task forces remain largely active only during election times, this framework proposes a resilient framework that is permanently organized, nationally supervised, institutionalized, and intelligence-based and will maintain election security not just during but even after election period. This proposed framework seeks to remedy the governance weaknesses highlighted by the participants through institutionalizing monitoring, investigations, prosecution coordination, witness/victim protection,

interagency cooperation, and organizational autonomy from the influence of local politics.

From the perspective of Institutional Resilience Theory (Boin et al., 2021), the suggested framework improves the coordination, learning capabilities of election security organizations, and resilience. As opposed to focusing on the crisis management process only, it enables the creation of resilient structures that will be able to foresee risks, ensure continuous operations, retain institutional memory, and remain accountable. This way, the framework resolves an important issue discovered in all the literature reviewed and confirmed by the experience of the participants, namely the lack of the permanent institutional structures in existing election security frameworks that would help in investigation, victim and witness protection, and post-election accountability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Security during election period extend beyond ensuring peace and order. Election security is a matter of governance and crime prevention that requires institutional dedication. This study proves that establishment of police task forces as a measure for addressing election-related violence is operationally viable, institutionally realistic, and socially acceptable. The participants perceived that presence of police personnel, security activities, and coordination among concerned institution were factors that deterred and quickly addressed election-related violence.

However, the results also indicate that it is hard to maintain such operational gains. The very nature of election task forces is temporary and they can be activated only during the election period and when election related violence occurred. With the declaration of winners, police personnel were reassigned, leading to reduced intelligence operations, less coordination between concerned government institution, limited resources, political pressure, inadequate witness and victims' protection, and the lack of continuity of investigations. Hence, many of the election-related cases tend to lose their momentum after the elections, which leads to a drop in the

victim and witnesses' participation and public trust in election security forces.

In addition, the study reveals the presence of a governance gap which has not been adequately addressed by the present election security system. Although previous research has made a thorough analysis of election violence, policing measures, and election management, there has been relatively less focus on the institutions required to ensure the process of investigation, protection of witnesses, cooperation among concerned government agencies, and prosecution even after elections period. The experiences of the participants suggest that the problem with the prevailing election security system is not the lack of emergency capacity but the lack of institutionality.

From the perspective of Institutional Resilience Theory, the findings of the study indicate that institutional resilience depends not only on the ability of the organization to respond effectively during violence but also on its capacity to sustain organizational learning, accountability, coordination, and adaptation over time. These enduring capacities enable institutions to maintain operational continuity, strengthen governance, and anticipate emerging risks.

The findings further demonstrate that because existing election task forces operate only on a temporary basis, they are unable to sustain these critical institutional functions once the election period end. Therefore, election security should no longer be viewed as a periodic policing responsibility but as a permanent governance function that institutionalizes continuity, resilience, accountability, and inter-agency collaboration throughout the entire electoral process.

The use of the Resilient Permanent Election Task Force Framework is recommended as an approach to address this governance gap. It is not an attempt to replace existing policies for election security operations but to build upon those policies by institutionalizing the procedures of investigation, case monitoring, intelligence, prosecution support, witness and victim protection, and proactive coordination among concerned government institution before, during, and after elections. This helps to add

value to public safety and public administration through the development of a task force that will help enhance democracy and preventing election-related violence in the long term.

Policy Recommendations

National Election Security Task Force Program: A Permanent, Nationally Controlled, and Integrated Election Security Framework for Election Hotspot Areas

Objectives of the Program

To establish and institutionalize a permanent, nationally PNP supervised Election Security Task Force that operates continuously in election hotspot areas and remains shielded from political influence;

To strengthen election security operations through continuous investigation, threat assessment, monitoring, intelligence gathering, and prosecution of election-related crimes before, during, and after election cycles;

To enhance the protection of victims and witnesses of election-related violence through access to witness protection programs, and security measures;

To institutionalize a collaborative election security system among the PNP, COMELEC, DOJ, AFP, Intelligence Community, local government units, and community stakeholders to improve information sharing, operational effectiveness and coordination; and,

To promote accountability, public trust, and sustainability in election security operations through professionalism, transparency, neutrality, dedicated funding, and effective governance mechanisms.

Methodologies / Strategies

First is the Establishment of a Permanent Election Security Task Force, creating a permanent organization under the direct supervision of the Chief, PNP. This permanent structure shall maintain dedicated, well-trained personnel responsible for Investigation, Intelligence, Operations, Servicing Legal Officer and prosecution support, and monitoring and evaluation.

Second, the Task Force shall be led and supervised by National-Level Command and

Control to protect security operations from the influence of local political clans. Security personnel shall be supervised directly by the Chief, PNP, assigned outside their areas of influence, and governed by a centralized reporting system to ensure uniform command and accountability. Fixed tenure to key personnel, especially investigators handling sensational cases shall further promote operational independence and neutrality.

Third, is Continuous Monitoring and Early Warning Systems. It proposes the activation of Investigation and Intelligence Databases, Election Hotspot Risk Mapping Systems, Election Security Monitoring Centers to assess threats against candidates and identify those who have the highest risk, and Early Warning and Response Mechanisms to support year-round monitoring of likely election-related violence and provide immediate proactive interventions to avoid the increase of violence, and other election-related crimes before they ever transpired.

Fourth, is the Witness and Victim Protection Mechanism, which seeks to address the most significant barriers in the study. Witnesses, victims and their family members are harassed, assaulted and threatened by the political clan and their associates. Through close coordination with the Department of Justice, the framework proposes the immediate relocation, risk assessment procedures, security details and their immediate referral to the Witness Protection Program, pending the processing of the legal documents required by law.

Fifth, is the development of an Integrated Election Security System. This strategy institutionalizes collaboration among the PNP, COMELEC, Department of Justice, AFP, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, and community stakeholders. Coordination shall be strengthened through intelligence-sharing platforms, joint planning conferences, joint investigation teams, unified incident reporting systems, and after-operations assessments.

Sixth, is Election Case Continuity Program which ensures that all cases transpired during the election period shall be continuously monitored by the Task Force from the time of its occurrence until the final disposition of

cases. The program proposes the implementation of election case tracking systems, establishment of court coordination teams, designation of case monitoring officers, appointment of prosecutorial liaison officers, and conduct of regular reviews of the status of cases to prevent delayed actions and resolution.

Seventh, is the formulation of a Sustainable Funding Mechanism. The findings of the study recognize that the success and capability of election security operations depend heavily on adequate fundings. Therefore, dedicated funding shall be allocated for investigation, witness and victim protection, intelligence gathering, Technological systems, personnel deployment, transportation and logistics, and specialized training to all personnel especially in the field of election security operation.

Such strategies are anticipated to contribute towards reducing election-related violence in hotspot areas in the Philippines, increase witness and victim participation in investigations and prosecutions, strengthen the neutrality and independence of election security operations, improve continuity of investigations and case disposition, enhance inter-agency coordination, increase public trust and confidence in election security institutions, and promote institutional resilience.

Ultimately, the framework seeks to protect democratic processes by ensuring peaceful, orderly, and credible elections throughout the country. The proposed framework shall be led by the PNP as the primary implementing agency, in partnership with the COMELEC, Department of Justice, Armed Forces of the Philippines, National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, and the Department of the Interior and Local Government.

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