

Business group warns outages may affect polls

By Othel V. Campos and Maricel Cruz – April 22, 2022

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The Management Association of the Philippines (MAP) raised alarm Thursday over power failures that may affect the May 9 national elections.

“It is imperative to develop an energy transition plan that places the Filipino and the Philippine context at its center, adheres to the key principles of climate equity and energy security, and supports the fulfilment of the country’s development goals,” MAP said in a statement.

For a safe and secure voting process, the group recommended addressing projected power shortages, particularly in the next 30 days, asking electricity users to adopt energy efficiency measures in their households, offices, and businesses.

The group has also reminded the distribution utilities and electric cooperatives in major demand areas or the Greater Metro Manila to prepare for or initiate their respective interruptible load program (ILP) throughout their franchise areas.

MAP also advised the National Grid Corporation of the Philippines (NGCP) to create provisions for additional reserve power and link with power plants that are not yet connected.

The Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) was also asked by the business group to temporarily suspend the secondary price cap (SPC) at the wholesale electricity spot market (WESM) and have asked the government to value the country’s energy infrastructure as a national security concern while giving priority to longer-term power development.

The government and the private sector must craft power generation-specific plans to stimulate the building of new generation capacity and avert possible supply gaps in the next 10 years, MAP said.

Earlier, Commission on Elections Commissioner George Garcia said the poll body’s Deputy Executive Director for Operations, Teopisto Elnas, was in constant communication with the Department of Energy about the power outlook for May.

Garcia added he will meet with Energy Undersecretary Wimpy Fuentebella to hear the agency’s efforts to avoid power outages on the day of voting.

“Does the spike in fuel prices have an effect as regards our power situation? We want to make a direct or indirect connection; we want an assurance that our power situation is good,” Garcia said in a press briefing.

Previously, policy group Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities warned of rotating blackouts in April and May due to the shutdown of large coal plants.

The Comelec in January released Resolution No. 10759, which details contingency procedures for the 2022 polls.

According to the document, if there is a power interruption, poll workers shall ensure that the vote-counting machine is connected to the battery.

Also, a congressional leader asked the Comelec, DOE, and several government agencies to take the needed steps to ensure the May 9 elections will be free from brownouts.

“The risk of unstable power supplies to our schools should be treated with great concern, especially as brownouts during election day have been historically viewed as badges of electoral fraud,” Quezon City Rep. Alfred Vargas said.

Vargas called for a multi-sectoral assessment of the expected power situation in May to include government agencies and the private sector.

The assessment, he said, “should identify the extent of the issue and, thereafter, urgently craft risk mitigation strategies, including, among others, budgetary support to public schools for electrical infrastructure enhancement.”

In a resolution, Vargas expressed concern that despite the importance of a stable power supply on election day, the Department of Energy (DOE) raised the possibility of rotational brownouts and power interruptions due to “extremely strained power reserves,” especially in Luzon.

The DOE’s projections are also backed by an independent study that forecasted tight power supply for the second quarter of the year, and raised the possibility of rotating power outages across the Luzon grid.

“The security and integrity of the 2022 Elections are intrinsically tied to the integrity of electronic voting counting machines (VCMs) and other electronic devices, and the unimpeded operation and administration of the elections in the polling centers require a stable and dependable power source,” Vargas said.

The Quezon City lawmaker said there is also a need to review and upgrade the electrical infrastructure of schools to be used as polling areas for May 9 to ensure stable power supply.

He said consultations with education stakeholders have revealed that some schools “face electrical infrastructure constraints, and some school buildings are not even fully connected to electricity.”

This has been supported by a study from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), which cited the Philippines as among countries in the ASEAN region “that have yet to achieve universal access of schools to electricity.”

While the Comelec and Department of Education are implementing measures to address election-day related concerns, Vargas said a multi-stakeholder approach is necessary to “determine the full extent of electric infrastructure constraints of our public schools and polling places and the same approach is critical in addressing these problems promptly and effectively.”