# Criminal abuse of a lifesaving tool

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Bravo to the “geniuses” who figured out how to weaponize the country’s emergency alert system to woo voters in the May midterm elections. These politicians, or their operators, thought they were being clever by exploiting the Emergency Cell Broadcast System (ECBS) for this never-before-seen type of campaigning.

Alas, their haste and desperation for votes made them blind to the criminal nature of their newfound means of self-promotion.

Last week, reports circulated that mobile phone users in certain areas of the country, including Masbate province, were receiving campaign messages through the ECBS, prompting quick pushback from the Commission on Elections (Comelec) and the Office of Civil Defense (OCD). Both agencies requested the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) to investigate the reported abuse of the alert system for election campaigning.

Weighing in on the controversy, Malacañang warned that anyone caught using the alert system to campaign for any candidate or political group in the May 12 elections would be “slapped with charges” and punished to the fullest extent of the law.

## Fast, area-wide warnings

“They should not abuse the emergency cell broadcast system. It should only be used for emergencies. They should not use it for their own gain,” Presidential Communications Office Undersecretary Claire Castro told a press briefing on April 8. An investigation by the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT) and the NTC is now in order, she said.

To be clear, the ECBS was created to save lives, not boost political careers.

Designed under Republic Act No. 10639, or the Free Mobile Disaster Alerts Act, the system is meant to issue fast, area-wide warnings about real emergencies, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, flash floods, mudslides, and typhoons.

“The alerts shall include contact information of local government units and other agencies required to respond to the situation. The alerts may contain other relevant information such as, but not limited to, evacuation areas, relief sites and pick-up points,” according to the law.

In a country that averages 20 tropical cyclones a year and is perched squarely on the Pacific Ring of Fire, this type of warning system is not a luxury but a necessity.

Last week’s eruption of Mount Kanlaon was a perfect reminder of just how closely our people sit on the precipice of disaster.

The volcano on Negros Island spewed a towering column of ash and debris four kilometers into the sky. Thankfully, no escalation followed, with the existing Alert Level 3 remaining hoisted and no lives being lost.

## Death and survival

But for Filipinos living near Kanlaon or other active volcanoes, fault lines, coastal villages facing the Pacific, or low-lying, flood-prone, or landslide-prone areas, the event was a forewarning on how quickly and suddenly calamity strikes in this country.

And in such situations, it is critical that emergency alerts are not only heard but acted upon without an ounce of hesitation. The public must learn to trust that these alarm sounds could spell the difference between death and survival.

Imagine what would happen when the people began to tune out these alerts, not because they’re complacent, but because they’ve been conditioned to assume it’s just another candidate begging for votes.

Comelec chair George Garcia was not exaggerating when he said those behind the fake alerts were putting people in danger. “We are afraid that if this becomes prevalent during the campaign season, people may wrongly assume that these alerts were false when a real disaster occurs,” the poll chief said in a radio interview.

And let’s not pretend this is just a case of poor judgment.

## Most at-risk country

The Philippines is considered the most at-risk country to extreme natural events and negative climate change, according to the World Risk Index, which measures vulnerability and exposure to natural extreme events. For three straight years, from 2021 to 2024, the country was found to have the worst exposure and most susceptible population to natural hazards, out of 193 member states of the United Nations.

For this reason, the government must take the matter seriously. It is imperative that the DICT, NTC, and OCD determine the source of the fake alerts and file the appropriate charges against perpetrators. While the law imposes only light penalties on offenders that aren’t corporations, Congress will do well to introduce amendments to inflict a harsher punishment on them.

The Comelec, for its part, must act decisively to disqualify any candidate found to have abused the emergency alert system. There is no gray area here: if one fakes an emergency alert to court voters, one is not just unfit for office but poses a threat to public safety.

Unscrupulous candidates and their spinmeisters must be stopped from hijacking this system and conditioning Filipinos to ignore alerts that may one day save their lives.