# Keep polls brownout-free

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Despite the assurance from the Department of Energy (DOE) that there will be enough electricity supply for a brownout-free election in May, there are those who remain worried. And they have a valid reason to be concerned.

Early last month, the National Grid Corp. of the Philippines (NGCP) warned that more red or yellow alerts could be issued during the summer months as unplanned power plant outages threaten supply. In a yellow alert, supply can still meet demand, but a plant breakdown could cause brownouts. A red alert means supply is no longer sufficient to meet demand and power interruptions are more likely. While NGCP painted this as the worst-case scenario, it cannot be dismissed outright because past experience showed that many power generators break down during the summer months.

Consider the yellow alert declared by NGCP on the Luzon grid on March 5. The Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities (ICSC), a Philippine-based nongovernmental organization that advocates for climate, energy, and low-carbon solutions, has pointed to a more alarming power supply situation following this first alert for 2025. “This year’s early occurrence is particularly concerning, as similar alerts in previous years were typically issued closer to peak summer months, such as April or May,” it noted.

## Unplanned outages

The two primary factors driving this concern are a surge in electricity demand due to higher-than-normal temperatures that lead to increased use of air conditioners and fans, and a significant reduction in supply due to forced outages of baseload power plants. NGCP has noted that since February, eight plants have been on forced outage, while four others have been non-operational since 2024. Sixteen facilities were also running on lower output than what they were designed for.

The increased demand, coupled with supply constraints, has placed immense pressure on the grid, according to ICSC. “These incidents are not isolated. Unplanned outages have been occurring frequently and are becoming more noticeable during summer due to higher energy demand. In May 2024, 21 out of 31 days of the month experienced either yellow or red alerts, which were largely caused by forced outages of coal-fired power plants,” it noted.

NGCP had projected that grid disruptions last March 3 to 9 were only 2 to 3 percent possible. “[The March 5] early alert, despite the low probability, raises an important point: If a yellow alert can occur with only a 2-3 percent probability, imagine what will happen in a 70-percent probability scenario in April and May. With conditions like these, we may see even more frequent yellow or red alerts in the Luzon grid as temperatures rise in the coming months,” it said.

## Supply issues

Adding to the unease is the issue raised by the DOE about Meralco’s 1,200-megawatt supply deal with Excellent Energy Resources Inc. (Eeri), whose natural gas plant is facing fuel supply issues and commissioning delays. Energy Assistant Secretary Mario Marasigan said some units of Eeri are still under testing and commissioning, despite the supply agreement requiring the delivery of committed power capacity by December 2024. “Our concern is that without the fulfillment of the power supply agreements of Meralco and Eeri, there is a gap,” Marasigan said.

Compounding this is the completion of the gas storage facility of Linseed Field Power Corp., whose fuel will be shared between Eeri and the Ilijan power plant, which is also experiencing a setback. NGCP has cautioned that while supply seems sufficient on paper—as the DOE says it will be in May—it has observed that over the years, unplanned outages of critical plants are a major factor in the power situation and have been the primary cause of power interruptions, particularly during summer months.

## Stable power

Sen. Sherwin Gatchalian is the latest to call on the Commission on Elections and the DOE to coordinate with NGCP and other industry stakeholders to guarantee uninterrupted and stable power from election day until the canvasing period. He said even a brief outage could delay voting, disrupt canvassing, and cast doubt on the results. Multisectoral groups had earlier made the same call as they launched the Kontra Brownout, Iwas Daya coalition, stressing that the May 2025 elections should be power outage-free.

Marasigan said the DOE has activated a task force to oversee preparations ahead of the elections. He added that the DOE has directed power plants to operate at full capacity and refrain from conducting preventive maintenance or repairs at least a week before and after the polls. The DOE has also prepared power-generating facilities and emergency solar lamps for areas that will require redundancy in their power supply.

We can only pray that the DOE is indeed on top of the situation and hope that its contingency measures will really work. Any brownout on election day will cast doubt on the results of the political exercise, even if cheating did not actually happen.