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Afghan regional leader threatens protests over disputed election

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A powerful backer of Afghan presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah said on Thursday his supporters would launch street protests and occupy government buildings if they were unhappy with the outcome of a disputed election.

The statement risked exacerbating tensions in a two-month political crisis that has destabilized Afghanistan ahead of the withdrawal of most foreign troops by the end of 2014, 13 years into a war against Taliban insurgents.

The final results of a U.N.-supervised investigation into allegations of mass vote rigging are expected within days, and Abdullah's rival, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, is widely expected to be declared the winner.

Atta Mohammad Noor, a supporter of Abdullah who fought the Soviets in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s, said there would be civil unrest if the audit did not throw out more than two million disputed votes, making Abdullah the winner.

Noor, governor of the northern province of Balkh, stopped short of calling for violence, saying the opposition movement "is not an armed resistance but a civil struggle for our people's rights".

But he did not rule out occupying government buildings.

"If our demands are not met, we will resort to the last option of seizing government buildings," Noor told supporters in a speech in the provincial capital, Mazar-i-Sharif.

Noor was a key commander in the Northern Alliance of Afghan factions that helped U.S. forces topple the Taliban's hardline Islamist government in 2001 for sheltering the al Qaeda network's leadership.

Abdullah, a former foreign minister, pledged last month to accept the results of the U.N. fraud investigation as part of a power-sharing compromise brokered by the United States.

Washington is desperate to prevent further instability as it and other NATO members prepare to withdraw their combat forces by the end of the year and hand over the job of keeping the country secure to newly trained Afghan forces.

The June run-off vote gave Ghani a 1.2 million vote lead over Abdullah, an outcome Abdullah said was the result of widespread cheating.

The U.S.-brokered compromise proposed creating a new position of chief executive which would go to the losing camp and bring with it significant powers within a unity government.

Negotiations over what those powers would be have broken down, and on Wednesday Ghani rejected the notion of sharing power equally, saying he did not want a "two-headed government."

Some Abdullah supporters have called for renewed protests, or even a parallel government, if Ghani is declared the winner. Such a move could stir up ethnic tensions that lay at the heart of the civil war during the early 1990s.

Abdullah draws most of his support from ethnic Tajiks and Hazara who largely made up the Northern Alliance, while Ghani is supported mainly by Pashtuns, the country's largest ethnic group.