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## Afghan parliamentary loser blocks road in protest

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A losing parliamentary candidate and his supporters blocked a major transit route in eastern Afghanistan for a third straight day Monday, threatening to keep the road closed until election officials reinstate ballots for him that were thrown out for fraud.

The move by Pacha Khan Zadran of Paktia province is the latest indication that a decision by Afghan election officials to discard 1.3 million, or nearly a quarter, of all ballots from a Sept. 18 poll as illegitimate may cause as much upset in the country as if the ballots had been included. Zadran first shut down the road Saturday and officials said his supporters were still blocking it Monday.

A spokesman for the Paktia provincial government Zadran has blocked the main highway between Paktia and neighboring Khost province for most daylight hours over the past three days. Zadran's supporters close down the route by walking into the middle of the street and shouting, preventing cars from passing. Though there have been breaks during which cars have gotten through, the spokesman said it is still creating major problem.

"I will not open the highway until the IEC gives back to me what is my right," Zadran told The Associated Press in a phone interview Sunday.

Since preliminary results were announced last week, candidates across Afghanistan who lost because of disqualified votes have alleged wrongdoing. Many say they have filed complaints with a fraud investigation body arguing that many legitimate votes were

discarded. Some have alleged that the election commission gave in to pressure to make sure certain candidates won by calling opponents' votes fraudulent.

They have little recourse. Afghanistan's fraud investigation body, the Electoral Complaints Commission, only has authority to make rulings on ballots that were included in the count, said commissioner Johann Kriegler, a South African elections expert. That means that the mixed U.N.-Afghan commission cannot force election officials to include more ballots in the tally even if there are allegations that they were unfairly excluded.

So Zadran said he is blocking the highway until the Independent Election Commission, or IEC, decides to include the 14,000 to 15,000 ballots for him that were held back.

"The main highway between Khost and is taken over by Pacha Khan Zadran's supporters," said spokesman Mubarez Zadran, who is not related to the candidate. Gardez is the largest city in Paktia province.

The governors of both Paktia and Khost were in meetings with Pacha Khan Zadran on Monday in an attempt to solve the problem, the spokesman said.

The Afghan election commission used statistical analyses to decide which votes to discard, flagging suspicious circumstances such as when exactly the number of voters exactly matched the number of ballots sent to a polling station, 100 percent of votes going to one candidate or ballots coming back from polling stations that were never open.

The results are still preliminary until fraud investigations finish and many of the 2,500 candidates who had vied for 249 seats are still hoping that winners will change as more ballots are thrown out and candidates are disqualified. The Electoral Complaints Commission is investigating about 200 candidates at the request of electoral officials.

A parliamentarian from Kandahar province who was not re-elected said he also feels that that he was cheated by ballots that shouldn't have been taken out but hopes the candidate investigations will eventually win him a seat.

"The only hope is that they list they gave us is not the final list," said Khaled Pashtun. He argued that people who wanted to thwart the electoral process had access to the final tallies. "They need to separate the good people from the bad people."

In eastern Ghazni province, parliamentarian Daoud Sultanzoy argued that the whole process for eliminating fraudulent ballots has left out whole chunks of the electorate — namely the members of the Pashtun ethnic group which was underrepresented in the final count. The province is relatively evenly split between the Pashtun and Hazara ethnic groups but nearly all the winners were Hazaras.

Ghazni is a volatile province plagued by militant attacks in which the ethnic makeup becomes particularly sensitive. Pashtuns — of the same ethnic group as the Taliban —

tend to live in the more dangerous areas. They are unlikely to see Hazara candidates as their representatives.

The vote was the first since a fraud-marred presidential poll nearly derailed international backing for the government of President Hamid Karzai last year. NATO allies threatened to start pulling out troops and aid if the administration did not rout corruption and make the next vote fairer.