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Protests as Afghan results released

11/24/2010

Afghan election officials have announced most of the long-delayed results from its controversial parliamentary election after massive fraud saw nearly a quarter of votes cancelled and 24 winners disqualified.

Dozens took to the streets of Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, on Wednesday to denounce the results as fraudulent and protest against a polling process they say was corrupt and shameful.

The September 18 parliamentary poll was Afghanistan's second since the 2001 US-led invasion brought down the Taliban, but certified results took far longer than expected to compile because of investigations into widespread corruption.

Consistent allegations of vote fraud in both polls have raised questions about the credibility of the government of Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, at a time when US and Nato officials have been re-examining their long-term commitment in Afghanistan.

Wednesday's events will not have helped that process. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) had promised to release full results more than 10 weeks after the poll but Fazl Ahmad Manawi, the IEC chairman, said results in volatile Ghazni province southwest of Kabul had still to be determined.

Disqualifications

The other 33 provinces plus one seat for Kuchi nomads were finalised, he said.

The IEC declared the vote a "major success", but disqualified another three people who won seats, according to preliminary results.

"There are ... 24 winning candidates that have been disqualified in total," Manawi said.

Those disqualifications by the UN-backed Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) cleared the way for the IEC to release final results.

The decision followed evidence of fraud and irregularities. At least three candidates were disqualified because they failed to resign from jobs in government. Under Afghan law, government officials cannot contest elections.

Those disqualified are understood to include allies of Karzai and also a first cousin of the president.

Western allies had hoped the election would be an improvement on the 2009 presidential vote which was marred by fraud, casting a long pall over Karzai's return to power and his pledge to wipe out corruption.

There are no standard political parties in Afghanistan and most of the 2,514 people who stood for 249 seats in the lower house were independent candidates, making it difficult to assess the results' political significance.

Disgruntled protesters

About 150 failed candidates and their supporters denouncing the results as fraudulent gathered outside Karzai's palace, demanding he "listen to the nation".

Some carried banners which read "Hijacked parliament = collapse of democracy" and "IEC is the enemy of democracy".

"We think the vote of the Afghan nation has been stolen. We have gathered here to protest against this," Najibullah Mujahed, a local demonstrator, said.

Losing candidates have staged a number of protests across the country, accusing electoral officials of taking bribes and victorious rivals of stuffing ballot boxes.

Election authorities have invalidated about 1.3 million of the 5.6 million votes cast after receiving more than 5,000 complaints of fraud in the wake of the poll. Of those, 2,500 complaints were classed as "serious".

Further controversy was caused by preliminary results showing that Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group and the war-torn country's traditional rulers, lost their majority in parliament.

Pashtun leaders say the Taliban, centred largely in the Pashtun-dominated south and east, prevented them from voting.

In Ghazni province, where Pashtuns apparently suffered a crushing defeat, Manawi delayed final election results, citing "technical problems".

Re-elections 'ruled out'

Despite the widespread concerns about fraud, and calls by protesters for the vote to be annulled, Manawi said there would not be another election.

We are not planning to hold another election in any place," he said.

Manawi ruled out re-elections in the 34 constituencies, but did not specify whether that also applied to Ghazni.

Karzai, himself a Pashtun, has said he would be in favour of a re-run in Ghazni "for the sake of our national unity".

The results were announced a day after a Pentagon report admitted that violence in Afghanistan was now at an all-time high as US-led Nato forces try to flush out the Taliban from cities and towns.

It said combat incidents were up 300 per cent since 2007 and 70 per cent since last year.

Nato leaders last week endorsed a plan to start handing Afghan forces command of the war next year, with the aim of ceding full control by 2014.

The United States and Nato currently have around 143,000 troops in Afghanistan.