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Afghanistan Arrests 9 in Election Probe

By Matthew Rosenberg, Habib Khan

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KABUL — Afghan authorities arrested nine private citizens and are seeking the arrest of four election officials on allegations of fraud in September's parliamentary vote, a top prosecutor said, deepening Afghanistan's political uncertainty at a crucial juncture in the fight against the Taliban.

Authorities are also looking into a person who works at the U.N. mission in Afghanistan, said Deputy Attorney General Rahmatullah Nazari without elaborating. The U.N. said it was looking into the matter.

The Attorney General's investigation sets up a potentially destabilizing confrontation that pits the administration of President Hamid Karzai against election officials and possibly even the international community at a critical moment. U.S. surge forces are clearing Taliban fighters from wide swaths of southern Afghanistan, making battlefield gains that coalition officials say can be capitalized upon only by a reliable and credible Afghan government.

Afghan and international observers had hoped the Sept. 18 parliamentary elections would indeed boost the government's credibility by improving on last year's fraud-ridden presidential vote, which returned President Karzai to office.

Instead, the similarly fraud-filled parliamentary vote and drawn out tallying process—complete results are now more than a month overdue—have underscored the fragility of Afghanistan's young democracy. Now there are fears among Western diplomats and Afghan observers that the Karzai administration, unhappy with the results announced so far, is seeking to alter the outcome through other means, thus the investigation.

As one Western official bluntly put it: "We are very worried."

The Western official and other diplomats questioned whether the Attorney General's office even has the legal authority to investigate allegations of election fraud.

Afghan prosecutors, who have been threatening to investigate for weeks, say they do have the authority. They say they have documentary evidence that shows wealthy and powerful private citizens tried to sway the vote by bribing election officials.

The nine people arrested Thursday on charges of passing bribes include money changers, the owners of two construction companies and other people who have "links" to election officials, said Mr. Nazari, the deputy attorney general, in an interview.

He said prosecutors are also seeking to arrest four elections officials—two from the Independent Election Commission, which organizes elections, and two from the Election Complaints Commission, which investigates fraud allegations and adjudicates disputes. Two of the sought-after election officials are spokesmen for their organizations.

While Afghan electoral authorities and Western diplomats have largely dismissed the prosecutors' allegations over the past few weeks, some international observers did report seeing workers from the Independent Election Commission, or IEC, stuff ballots in at least one province during the vote.

IEC spokesman Noor Muhammad Noor said late Thursday that he had been given notice of an arrest warrant for himself. But he didn't know of any others issued for IEC staffers.

The complaints commission spokesman, Zia Rafat, said he had not been notified any warrants issued for either himself or others at the organization.

Word of the arrests came a day after the IEC announced nearly complete results for the vote. The IEC said it had disqualified a total of 24 winning candidates—about 10% of the total seats—because of evidence of ballot stuffing, fraud and other irregularities.

The disqualified candidates come from across Afghanistan's chaotic political scene and include some Karzai loyalists. Western election observers say that it does appear Mr. Karzai will have fewer supporters in the new parliament, in part because of the disqualifications, although it is hard measure because of the lack of political parties and the opaque—and sometimes shifting—loyalties of many lawmakers.

The moves by the IEC have infuriated many of those knocked out and given the outright losers rhetorical ammunition to claim they have been cheated out of their seats. There have been repeated protests by the losing candidates, who have pressed Attorney General Mohammed Ishaq Aloko to investigate.

President Karzai said in a statement Thursday, issued before news of the arrests broke, that the losers shouldn't protest and instead take their grievances to the courts.

His statement didn't please some Western officials and diplomats, who worried that candidates going to the courts, which do have the power to alter results, could further delay the formation of a new parliament.

The United Nations and Afghanistan's Western backers, who financed the election, haven't openly challenged Mr. Aloko's motives.

But they have in previous weeks pressed Mr. Aloko to stand down and let the IEC and the complaints commission do their work.

In a public statement earlier this month, the U.N.'s top envoy to Afghanistan, Staffan de Mistura, urged Mr. Aloko to "defer electoral decisions to electoral authorities."

Also of concern to Western officials and Afghan observers is the situation in the province of Ghazni, where IEC officials said the results were too lopsided to let stand.

There, the ethnic Pashtun majority, the people from whom the Taliban draw almost all its members, stayed away from the polls, handing all 11 seats to candidates from the ethnic Hazara minority.

An immediate rerun is considered too dangerous, and the IEC is debating how best to fill those seats, officials said. One possible plan is to simply leave the lawmakers elected in the last election, in 2005, in place until a rerun could be held at some future date, an arrangement that officials say is constitutional.