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The New York Times

Afghanistan Government Arrests 4 on Election Panel

By ROD NORDLAND

12/5/2010

KABUL, Afghanistan — Four officials of an Afghan election commission were arrested on Sunday by President Hamid Karzai's government, which has been deeply critical of the panel's handling of disputed parliamentary elections.

The arrests, which were confirmed by Abdullah Ahmadzai, the chief electoral officer of the panel, the Independent Election Commission, included the head of the commission's logistics department and three lower-level employees. Mr. Ahmadzai said the attorney general ordered the four taken from the commission's offices for questioning in a 2009 case, but that the police then ordered their detention. He said he did not know on what charges the four were held.

"We do not really know the intention behind this," Mr. Ahmadzai said. "I cannot call it anything other than pressure at this time. We have been trying to get clarity why they have been arrested."

Hafizullah Hafiz, the head of the complaints department in the office of Attorney General Mohammed Ishaq Aloko, said that the four were charged with abuse of official office and corruption in purchasing related to the 2009 presidential election, not the parliamentary

elections on Sept. 18 this year. A Western diplomat, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly, said the arrests appeared to be a face-saving move by the attorney general, who has been under strong political pressure to act against the election commission.

“They haven’t been able to find anything to do with the I.E.C. in the 2010 elections, so they pick some 2009 cases and it’s relatively safe to move on, and it’s nothing that challenges the results,” he said.

Mr. Hafiz said the attorney general’s office had arrested 11 people for vote-rigging in the 2010 elections, including currency traders and go-betweens who claimed they could get vote totals changed for a price. But he said earlier claims by the office that election commission officials and a [United Nations](#) employee were among the 11 had not been supported by investigations. Despite earlier accusations by the attorney general’s office against the spokesmen for the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission, no arrests have been made.

Earlier, Mr. Aloko had denounced the election commission for certifying the results of the Sept. 18 election, saying that such certification was premature because criminal investigations were incomplete. Other officials said those investigations involved personnel from both election commissions.

Western diplomats and United Nations officials have praised the commissions’ work, despite a badly flawed election in which a fourth of the votes were disallowed as suspect and 24 candidates were disqualified because of electoral fraud.

President Karzai, though, has pointedly refrained from supporting the commissions, and encouraged those who were unhappy with the [election results](#) to bring legal cases before the attorney general. The new Parliament, which is not scheduled to convene until Jan. 21, would reflect a decrease in support for Mr. Karzai, and a drastic drop in the number of Pashtun members, even though Pashtuns are the country’s dominant ethnic group.

Candidates disqualified in last September’s elections and their supporters have been holding daily but lightly attended demonstrations here, demanding new elections or reinstatement. Many protesters include prominent political figures and members of the last Parliament, and their gatherings have been treated deferentially by the police and the authorities.

Armed followers of one protester, Pacha Khan Zadran, a member of the former Parliament and an old mujahedeen commander from Paktia Province, have been blocking the main highway from Kabul to the city of Khost in eastern [Afghanistan](#). Mr. Zadran claimed Sunday that in a recent meeting with the attorney general, he and other protesters were assured that the Independent Election Commission chairman, Fazal Ahmad Manawi, was about to be arrested on election fraud charges.

Mr. Hafiz, however, denied that any charges against Mr. Manawi were being considered. Such a meeting did take place, Mr. Hafiz said, but Mr. Aloko told him, “I never said such a thing to anyone” regarding possible charges against Mr. Manawi.

Also in Afghanistan on Sunday:

¶A suicide bomber wearing an explosive vest killed two [NATO](#) soldiers and two Afghan soldiers when he blew himself up in a bazaar set up inside a NATO military base in the Gardez area of eastern Paktia Province, Afghan officials said. Seventeen soldiers and seven civilians were wounded, they said. A [Taliban](#) spokesman claimed responsibility for the attack.

¶In southern Afghanistan, NATO reported that one service member was killed, without giving any details. In the capital of Helmand Province, Lashkar Gah, an Afghan employee of an American contractor, International Relief and Development, was shot to death by men on a motorcycle, a provincial government spokesman, Daoud Ahmadi, said.