

Beat: Local

Top Afghan election official quits amid fraud allegations

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USPA News - Afghanistan's chief electoral officer, who is at the center of fraud allegations in the presidential run-off that took place earlier this month, resigned on Monday after an audio tape was released that allegedly revealed he was trying to influence the outcome of the election. Zia-ul-Haq Amarkhil, the head of the Secretariat of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), said he had made the decision to quit without being pressured by anyone else.

He said he made the decision "for the sake of national unity" and urged all sides to respect the outcome of the election. Amarkhil has been at the center of controversy since he was stopped by police after shifting unused ballot material out of the IEC's headquarters. The election official rejected claims of widespread fraud by presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah, saying the electoral materials were being taken to polling centers that had run out of ballot paper. The allegations intensified over the weekend after Abdullah's campaign released an audio tape in which Amarkhil tells people to vote for Ashraf Ghani, who lost the first round of the election. The tapes also appear to reveal Amarkhil urging a colleague to "bring the sheep stuffed and not empty" in an apparent reference to ballot box-stuffing. Amarkhil rejected the authenticity of the tape at a televised news conference on Monday. Also on Monday, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said the United States was closely following the election process in Afghanistan. "Allegations of improper behavior and credible complaints should be investigated through proper channels," he said. "We call upon the electoral institutions to ensure that all allegations of fraud brought to them are given careful and impartial review and adjudication." The White House further urged both sides to remain engaged with the electoral institutions after Abdullah said he would no longer co-operate with the IEC due to the fraud allegations. "Dialogue between the candidates and the electoral bodies is essential, and we encourage direct discussions as soon as possible," Earnest said. Abdullah won the first round of the presidential vote in early April, obtaining almost 890,000 votes more than rival Ashraf Ghani but below the more than 50 percent required to have avoided a run-off. The preliminary results of the second round are due on July 2, though the final results are not expected before July 22.

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