

HOW IS ABDULLAH OBTAINING SO MANY TAPES OF PHONE CALLS?

It is looking more and more likely that Abdullah Abdullah will continue his boycott of the vote-counting process in Afghanistan. As I noted Friday, thousands of his supporters took to the streets to protest the expected outcome and to call for fraudulent votes to be discarded. Abdullah's camp released even more evidence Saturday, consisting of two audiotapes of conversations among officials in Paktika province regarding 20 ballot boxes which were found to be already stuffed with ballots on the night before the election. ToloNews informs us that one of the tapes was a conversation between the Paktika provincial Independent Election Commission (IEC) head and the executive assistant of Zia-ul-Haq Amarkhail (the head of the IEC, who resigned after Abdullah released the first set of tapes). The second tape purports to be yet another recording of Amarkhail himself, this time participating in a discussion (again with the provincial IEC head) of how to deflect blame for the stuffed ballot boxes found in Paktika:

Amarkhail begins by stressing his frustration about the situation with the ANA commander revealing information to the media about the ballot stuffing. The provincial IEC head told Amarkhail that a video was made of the men stuffing 20 ballot boxes with 12,000 votes and in each box exactly 600 votes were stuffed and that the ANA wants to "broadcast this through TOLO TV."

Concerned and upset about their position, the provincial IEC head suggests to Amarkhail that they hold a press conference defaming the ANA

commander by stating that these frauds were conducted by the commander and his men.

After proposing the idea, the Gov. of Paktika, Muhebullah Samim, takes the phone approving the idea of holding a press conference expressing to Amarkhail that this is their only way out is by blaming the commander that he forced the “boys to do this and the boys will admit to it. The boys are willing to say that the ANA commander has forced them to stuff boxes.”

Content with the idea, Amarkhail agrees to the plan and begins to tell the men what needs to be done and how.

In a followup article, ToloNews provides the most incriminating part of the discussion and notes that they had reported the discovery of the stuffed ballot boxes before the election on the day they were found by the army:

The conversation, supposedly between the Gov. of Paktika and Amarkhail, is as follows:

“Governor: They have a serious problem.

Amarkhail: Yes, it is a major problem.

Governor: Now the only solution is to blame it on the Afghan National Army (ANA) commander and say that he forced these employees. They are ready to confirm it too.

Amarkhail: Have the boys confessed?

Governor: No, they haven’t said anything yet. They are ready to say that they were forced by the ANA to stuff the ballot boxes and defame the election process.

Amarkhail: Then do it brother, and say that it was done by the ANA to defame

the election process.”

The recording is said to have taken place the day before the election, when the Commander of the ANA’s Thunder 203 Battalion in Paktika province arrested five IEC officials in Barmal district on charges of ballot stuffing.

“A night before the elections, 20 ballot boxes were stuffed in Barmal district,” commander Sharifullah Yaftali told TOLONews on June 13. “Our forces seized the boxes and currently the boxes are at the NDS Office of the province,” he said.

In their coverage of this ongoing crisis in Afghanistan, the New York Times raises a very important question:

While Mr. Ghani has denounced the tapes as fake, very few others have publicly challenged the credibility of the intercepts. Instead, most have wondered aloud how the campaign managed to get its hands on illegal recordings.

Indeed. Just how is Abdullah getting these recordings?

Recall that Afghanistan is “Country X”, the second country (besides the Bahamas), where the NSA uses MYSTIC to record all phone calls within the country. On the surface, however, one would not expect the NSA to be behind these leaks, as they are serving to disrupt the election process and potentially delay the swearing in of a new President who would quickly sign the Bilateral Security Agreement which will grant US troops remaining in the country next year immunity from prosecution in Afghan courts. If Abdullah is getting the recordings directly from NSA, then they would presumably have to be coming from an individual acting on their own at great risk for arrest and prosecution.

I can't help wondering if somehow, instead of a rogue NSA agent, Abdullah is being aided by operatives involved in Pakistan's intelligence services. Recall that I speculated earlier in the year on increased levels of cooperation between US and Pakistani intelligence operations, especially regarding Pakistan's plans to take on militants in Pakistan's tribal regions. Pakistan's military operation in North Waziristan is now underway at full force. Has the US provided Pakistan with the means to record phone calls in the region? Or, alternatively, is the US providing Pakistan with a portion of the feed it has developed? Note that Afghanistan's Paktika province shares a border with North Waziristan in Pakistan. Most of the recordings that Abdullah has released come from Paktika province, although at least one comes from Maidan Wardak province, which is more distant from the Pakistan border. In considering these possibilities, note that Afghanistan's Ministry of the Interior quickly claimed not to have been involved after the release of the first phone call and Afghanistan's government protested loudly after Wikileaks identified Afghanistan as Country X, demanding that the US practice of recording calls be stopped.

I lean toward seeing Pakistan's hand in Abdullah obtaining the recordings. It would be so like the ISI to first convince the US that this time, for sure, we can trust them with new intelligence tools and data, only for them to use the information gleaned in a way to derail the entire election process in Afghanistan. And of course, they would do this at the very same time they are attacking militants in North Waziristan, even claiming that the Haqqani Network is among their targets there. That would fit their behavior so well.