

Afghan Mayor Accused of Grand Theft

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"I do what I want," says Pul-e Alam mayor, as anti-corruption agency and regional governor say they are powerless to act on allegations.

The mayor of a city in eastern Afghanistan faces accusations that he has used his position to embezzle public funds.

Afghanistan's anti-corruption agency, the governor of Logar province, and former employees of the mayor all say they have proof that Ahmad Khan Ulfat acted illegally in a number of separate cases.

Ulfat, who has been mayor of Pul-e Alam, the administrative centre of Logar province, since June 2012, denies any wrongdoing.

Aminullah Amanat, an official from the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC), said the agency had documented serial cases of alleged misconduct by the mayor.

"Ahmad Khan Ulfat has not only committed corruption and forgery, he is also accused of major theft, bribery, illegal appointments and dismissals, land seizures and dozens of other breaches of the law," he told IWPR,

According to Amanat, the anti-corruption agency launched an investigation after receiving dozens of complaints about Ulfat from both municipal employees and local residents.

"All the financial documents which the mayor showed us in the course of the investigation were forgeries, and he has used these documents to embezzle tens of millions of afghani from the municipality's revenues," added Amanat.

Another MEC official said the agency had filed a recommendation for legal action against Ulfat several months ago, but central government had done nothing about it.

Mohammad Hashim Faizi, the acting governor of Logar province, told IWPR that he had hard evidence that Ulfat had embezzled tens of millions of afghanis from the city's funds.

MONEY MISSING FROM BANK ACCOUNTS

One of several allegations made against the mayor is that he removed public funds from the municipality's bank account.

Ainuddin, then finance and accounts manager of the Logar municipality, told IWPR that Ulfat made five withdrawals totaling 130,000 dollars from the Azizi Bank in Pul-e Alam in the course of 2012.

He said that the mayor asked him to countersign the withdrawal cheques, as required by municipal regulations.

"The mayor asked me into his office on three separate occasions and insisted I put my signature to the cheques, for which there was no legal basis for disbursement," he said.

When he refused, Ainuddin says, the mayor went ahead and forged his signature.

Ainuddin said that as soon as he became aware of the withdrawals, he reported them to the provincial governor at the time, Mohammad Iqbal Azizi, who ordered an investigation. IWPR has a copy of the 52-page document listing the findings of this investigation, which concluded that Ulfat had embezzled 130,000 dollars from the account.

Ainuddin told IWPR that he spotted a wider discrepancy in the city's finances over the period between when Ulfat came into office and the point at which he himself was fired.

Municipal-level governments in Afghanistan are supposed to sustain themselves on the revenues they generate without additional funding from central government.

The day before Ulfat was appointed, Ainuddin inquired about the funds held in Azizi Bank and was told they came to nearly 80 million afghani. Two days before Ainuddin was dismissed, the liquid assets had fallen to 16 million afghani. In US currency, the drop was from 1.5 dollars to 280,000 dollars.

Ainuddeen said he did not believe the mayor had spent anywhere near the missing amount on municipal

works.

“How could over a million dollars disappear from the account? People must judge for themselves where the money has gone,” he said.

QUESTIONS OVER BUILDING CONTRACT AWARDS

Another set of allegations relate to the way construction contracts were awarded.

In December 2012, Ulfat agreed a 170,000 dollar contract with a building company to build walls around municipal property in Pul-e Alam.

Mir Ahmad, who was manager of the city engineering department at the time, says his office was not consulted about the work, nor was there any bidding process for the contract.

“The mayor brought the document for the agreed contract and asked me to sign off on it,” said Ahmad. “When I refused, he told me, ‘Get out – you’re dismissed from your position’.”

After Ahmad was fired, the construction project went ahead.

IWPR spoke to another former municipal official, Shabir Ahmad, who told a similar story of being dismissed summarily after refusing to carry out the mayor’s wishes.

Ahmad was the municipal officer in charge of cost estimates, and he told IWPR how in March 2013, the mayor ordered the destruction of 3,600 square metres of fencing along the central reservation on the main road to Kabul in Pul-e Alam. The barrier had only been put up in 2008, at a cost of tens of thousands of dollars to the city.

To install replacement fencing, Ulfat awarded a contract to another company, again without a bidding process or consultation with city engineers, according to Ahmad.

“Not even a madman would destroy well-maintained, new fences and replace them with others,” Ahmad said.

After the contract had already been issued, Ahmad said, the mayor asked him to sign a document stating that the old fences were so badly damaged that a 160,000 dollar contract was required to replace them.

At this point, Ahmad says, he had already heard talk of a kickback being paid for the contract, so he refused to sign the statement.

Ulfat then sacked him from his job, telling him, “Since you won’t accept my orders, I don’t need you any more.”

After sacking Ahmad, the mayor asked eight other staff from the engineering department to sign the document, but none of them would agree to do so. These eight employees were subsequently sacked. IWPR has interviewed all eight and has a copy of the letters ordering their dismissal.

The final case involves allegations that state-owned land was sold off for cash.

Amanat, the anti-corruption official, said that in June 2013 the MEC agency carried out an investigation into the sale of land plots, and found that the mayor had sold them off for 175,000 dollars.

Hajji Muhammad Akbar Stanekzai, a member of parliament who represents Logar province, provided more information on these transactions. The 2.2 hectares of state-owned land in question, he said, was set aside by Ulfat’s predecessor as mayor, Mohammad Hashem Hussein, as a site for a future mosque. Instead, he claims, Ulfat carved the site up into 25 residential plots and sold all of them to one individual.

“The mayor sold each plot of the land for 7,000 dollars and pocketed all the money,” Stanekzai said.

IWPR has seen the documentary evidence for the sale.

MAYOR DENIES WRONGDOING

When this IWPR reporter put all these allegations to Mayor Ulfat in person, he flatly denied some of them and refused to discuss others.

In response to allegations that he accepted a kickback for a contract to replace highway barriers, he said, “I am the mayor, not an ordinary man. I will do whatever I want by exercising my authority.”

IWPR showed the mayor the documents confirming the sale of land earmarked for a mosque, but he denied that he had stolen anything.

“Everything you’re saying is conspiracy, and I don’t accept any of it,” he added.

On the fall in municipal bank assets from 80 to 16 million afghani, Ulfat said, “The municipal budget is a confidential matter and it’s none of the media’s business.”

IWPR next asked about the circumstances in which 11 staff members were fired, Ulfat said that these dismissals were a consequence of the ebb and flow of work, and were of no public interest.

“I am not a corrupt man who takes bribes; all my activities are done according to plan and in line with the law,” he added.

After continued questioning on the dismissals, the mayor became angry and said, I don’t have to tell the media the reasons behind dismissals of my staff.”

The mayor ended the interview here, refusing to answer further questions relating to the 130,000-dollar withdrawal from Azizi Bank.

Asked why the governor’s office did not take action against Ulfat in the face of widely-documented information, Logar governor Faizi said that he only had powers to pass on the facts to central government.

“It is Kabul that should be asked why it doesn’t relieve Ahmad Khan Ulfat of his job and bring him to the [prosecuting] attorney’s office,” he added.

Abdul Maqsd Azizi is an IWPR-trained reporter in Afghanistan.

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