

UK's Boris Johnson faces probe over funding of flat renovation

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Johnson is grappling with an array of accusations which opponents say show that he is unfit for office and that his government is riddled by sleaze and cronyism [File: Phil Noble/Pool via Reuters]

London, April 28 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom's Electoral Commission opened an investigation on Wednesday into the financing of the refurbishment of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's flat, saying there were grounds to suspect an offence may have been committed.

Eight days before local elections across England and for the election of the Welsh and Scottish regional assemblies, Johnson is facing a stream of allegations ranging from his muddled initial handling of the COVID-19 crisis to questions about who leaked what from his office.

"We are now satisfied that there are reasonable grounds to suspect that an offence or offences may have occurred," the Electoral Commission said of the financing of the flat above Number 11 Downing Street where Johnson resides. "We will therefore continue this work as a formal investigation to establish whether this is the case," it added.

The investigation will determine whether any transactions relating to the works fall within the regime regulated by the Electoral Commission and whether such funding was reported as required. If it finds that an offence has occurred, and that there is sufficient evidence, then the Electoral Commission can issue a fine or refer the matter to the police.

Asked in the UK Parliament on Wednesday who paid the initial invoices for the refurbishment, Johnson said he had covered the costs and he had conformed in full with the code of conduct and ministerial code. "The answer is I have covered the costs," said Johnson under questioning from opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer, who cast Johnson as "Major Sleaze".

Though Johnson has over the years repeatedly weathered gaffes, crises over Brexit and disclosures about his adultery, he is now grappling with an array of accusations which opponents say show that he is unfit for office and that his government is riddled by sleaze and cronyism.

His supporters deny he has done anything wrong and say he is focused on the COVID-19 crisis. Starmer said Johnson had been selecting wallpaper for 840 pounds (\$1,164) a roll in the middle of the crisis.

Asked last month about the refurbishment, Johnson's spokeswoman said all donations and gifts were properly declared, and that no Conservative Party funds were used to pay for it. Johnson has a taxpayer-funded £30,000 (\$42,000) allowance each year for maintaining and furnishing his official residence, but anything above that must be met by the prime minister.

Ministers have said Johnson has paid for the work himself, but it is unclear when he paid, and whether the refurbishment, reported to have cost 200,000 pounds (\$280,000) was initially financed by a loan of some kind. Under political financing rules, Johnson would have been required to declare this.

Critics say that if the funds had come originally from a Conservative Party supporter, this would raise the question of influence-peddling. Johnson was asked in Parliament if the refurbishment was financed by Conservative Party donor David Brownlow. "The answer is that I have covered the cost," Johnson said.

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