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New President of Afghanistan Welcomes Back Times Reporter

Azam-Ahmed

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A New York Times correspondent expelled this summer by the government of Afghanistan will be allowed to return to the country effective immediately, according to an order issued on Sunday by the Afghan attorney general's office.

The decision to lift the order against the reporter, Matthew Rosenberg, came days after the inauguration of Ashraf Ghani as the new president. Mr. Ghani had publicly promised to reverse the action taken by the government of his predecessor, Hamid Karzai.

Mr. Ghani called Joseph Kahn, The Times's assistant editor for international, early Sunday and said that Mr. Rosenberg would be welcome back in Afghanistan, as would any other reporters The Times wanted to send.

The decision was welcomed by Dean Baquet, executive editor of The Times, who said: "We are appreciative that the new administration understands the value of the press and that Matt is an honest and independent journalist. We thank President Ghani for his action."

Mr. Ghani has struck a markedly different tone in his first few days in office from that of Mr. Karzai, whose relationship with the West had grown increasingly acrimonious.

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Matthew Rosenberg, an American correspondent for The New York Times, and Basir Azizi, the spokesman for Afghanistan's attorney general, discussed the journalist's expulsion from the country.

Publish Date August 20, 2014. Photo by Mohammad Ismail/Reuters.

On his first day in office, Mr. Ghani signed long-term security deals with the United States and NATO — deals that Mr. Karzai had refused to sign for months — paving the way for American and other foreign soldiers to remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014.

The decision in late August to expel Mr. Rosenberg and bar him from re-entering the country came after The Times published an article Aug. 18 by the reporter in which senior Afghan government officials threatened to seize power and create an interim government if an election impasse gripping the country was not resolved. The article cited high-ranking government sources, some of whom declined to be named for fear of prosecution.

After the second round of elections in Afghanistan, the country was thrown into crisis when Mr. Ghani's opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, made accusations of wide-scale fraud. After months of brinkmanship, the United Nations sponsored an audit of 100 percent of the vote, paving the way for a power-sharing agreement between the two candidates that saw Mr. Ghani installed as president and Mr. Abdullah named chief executive officer, a post akin to that of prime minister.

Mr. Rosenberg's article was published in the midst of the debate over the election, and the government claimed it was "divisive and contrary to the national interest, security and stability of Afghanistan."

After initially placing a travel ban on Mr. Rosenberg, a veteran foreign correspondent who has covered Afghanistan for years, the attorney general's office ordered him to leave the country within 24 hours. The office did not offer any legal grounds for the expulsion, an unprecedented move in the 13 years of Mr. Karzai's government.

The United States Embassy in Kabul, as well as the United Nations, condemned the move by the Afghan government, describing it as counter to the interests of press freedom.