

AFGHANISTAN BARS ROSENBERG FROM LEAVING OVER TIMES REPORT ON COUP PLAN

With the latest deadline for Afghanistan to resolve its election crisis and put into place a government that can sign a Bilateral Security Agreement now only two weeks from tomorrow (when the NATO Summit convenes in Wales), the pressure on Afghan officials is leading to breakdowns on many fronts. Violence continues in the vote recount process and sniping back and forth in the press over outright insurrection is reaching new levels (note in this article that Abdullah supporters are favoring power sharing while Ghani's side is pushing the constitution, suggesting Ghani feels confident of winning the recount).

Against this uncertain background, Matthew Rosenberg's story published late Monday on the New York Times website and appearing in Tuesday's paper (on page A7, not very prominent placement) remarkably led to him being summoned and questioned by the attorney general's office in Afghanistan. Further, it appears that Rosenberg will not be allowed to leave the country until he answers questions (he has refused so far) regarding the sources for his article.

The article that has upset the attorney general states that various unnamed government figures are floating the idea of an interim government since the election recount is taking so long to resolve. (Note that Hamid Karzai's term in office already has officially expired.) Although the plan is referred to as a "soft coup", the idea is that there would be a quick return to democracy. Further, Rosenberg goes to great lengths to point out that the entire exercise seems to be more of a warning to the Abdullah and Ghani camps to resolve things quickly rather

than an actual attempt to seize power:

A coterie of powerful Afghan government ministers and officials with strong ties to the security forces are threatening to seize power if an election impasse that has paralyzed the country is not resolved soon.

Though it is unusual to telegraph plans for what could amount to a coup – though no one is calling it that – the officials all stressed that they hoped the mere threat of forming an interim government would persuade the country's rival presidential candidates, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, to make the compromises needed to end the crisis.

The Times describes Rosenberg's treatment during the questioning:

The senior prosecutor who summoned Mr. Rosenberg, Gen. Sayed Noorullah Sadat, whose title is general director of crimes against external and internal security, asked him to identify anonymous government sources quoted in the article, which he declined to do.

Mr. Rosenberg objected to General Sadat's insistence that he sign a statement without a lawyer present. Mr. Rosenberg then asked to leave the interrogation room and was initially refused permission to do so, until the prosecutors conferred with a higher-ranking official.

They declined to name that official. "It's a confidential source," said another general who was present at the interrogation. He declined to give his own name as well, but was later identified as Gen. Abdul Salem Ismat, who works in General Sadat's directorate. (Although the attorney general's office is a civilian agency,

some officials retain the ranks they gained in police or military agencies.)

The attorney general's office is on very shaky ground here:

During the interrogation on Tuesday, General Sadat was unable to name any criminal offense that was under investigation, or cite any laws that had been broken.

"Right now, there's no case, no legal charges, there's nothing," he said. But he did not rule out the possibility of charges in the future.

The State Department criticized the Afghanistan government's actions.

Hmm. No offense under investigation, no law broken, no case, no charges, and yet Rosenberg was brought in. I'm guessing the State Department criticism was something along the lines of "Who do you think you are, Ferguson?" At least he wasn't teargassed.

Update: Just after this was posted, it was announced that Rosenberg has now been expelled from Afghanistan:

The attorney general of Afghanistan on Wednesday ordered the expulsion of an American correspondent for The New York Times, Matthew Rosenberg, and banned him from re-entering the country.