

## Newsletter, OCTOBER 27, 2022

Dear friends,

now we - my wife Anne Marie and I - are soon ten weeks in Afghanistan. There it should be possible to give an overview of this country of the Taliban. But it isn't.

**The Taliban's system of rule:** The Taliban's Afghanistan does not fit into a category that we Westerners are familiar with. It is not a simple dictatorship like Putin's Russia, nor is it a hierarchically organized oligarchy of religious ideologues like Iran. A formula that unravels the essence of the Taliban's system of rule is hard to find. Yet the Taliban explain the principles of their rule in a few words: They follow the laws of Sharia and the customs of the Afghan people. Sharia was developed more than two hundred years after the Prophet in the burgeoning centers of Islam such as Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo. It was intended to apply to all Muslims. But most of its provisions can be suspended temporally and regionally for the sake of peace. By the customs of the Afghan people, the Taliban mean the traditions of the nomads in the steppes and the farmers in their barren fields. But these traditions do not allow exceptions. How does this fit together? In this compound, Sharia can only play the role of a reference to Islam. The core of the Taliban aspirations are the archaic, patriarchal laws of the tribes that have "always existed."

The longing for the good old customs is certainly understandable. Since 1900 at the latest, parts of the Afghan elite have had contacts abroad. They got to know hospitals and universities in America or France. They admired factories and militaries in England and Germany. In contrast, how "backward" was their homeland. They were ashamed and demanded radical modernization in Afghanistan. In 1919, King Amanullah came to power. He was determined to make Afghanistan modern.

Conscription and compulsory education were introduced, and specialized ministries with hundreds of civil servants were created. Previously, emirs had ruled with the help of beaules. Their power now passed to the civil servants. They were to enforce compulsory education, compulsory military service and many modern innovations.

The citizens, however, needed their children for work in the family and in the fields and were reluctant to send them to school or even to the military. Up to then at best, they could only learn to read and write from the mullah. The legal system had been in the hands of religiously trained kadis. Now state courts were introduced. Everything was to be like in the countries of the infidels. Did they want to eliminate Islam?

The government gave orders. The citizens had to obey. In 1929, there was an uprising. Amanullah abdicated. In 1978, communists putsched their way into power. They wanted to modernize Afghanistan in their own way and oust Islam. The opposition between modernizers and defenders of the old order now turned into civil war and bitter hostility. Decades of bloodshed followed. Finally, the Taliban prevailed. The Taliban want to undo all the mistakes of the modernizers.

The archaic tribal structures that prevail in villages and in the tents of nomads are now to be enforced throughout the country. A tribal society is composed of tribes, or ethnic groupings. The tribes, in turn, break down into clans, and the clans into sippas and extended families. Families, clans, sippas and tribes live side by side, usually in mutual distrust. They are represented by tribal, clan, sippa, and family elders, who are primarily concerned with settling disputes within their own ranks and asserting the rights of their own clientele in assemblies of clans, sippas, and tribes.

This world of major and minor chiefs who somehow have to get along with each other is now also found in the realm of the state. The Taliban's power circles consist of chiefs of clans and tribes. And there are now larger and smaller Taliban leaders living side by side, as they know from living together

within the tribal world. One is deputy minister in the Ministry of Health, one is head of the office of the Minister of Energy, one is minister of the border and tribal affairs. They have to get a handle on their own area. To do this, they place sons and nephews in subordinate positions.

In tribal society, many major and minor leaders play a role. But the tribal society as such has no political program, no objective, except that the tribal society should continue to exist as it has always existed. It also has no leader to represent or enforce a particular direction.

What individual tribal leaders have to do comes from the unwritten duties of being in a tribal society - settling disputes; in meetings, representing the interests of one's own clan; and making sure that everyone else adheres to the old order as well. The Taliban movement also does not have a leader who represents a program or direction. There are rope lines among the leading Taliban. Observers are waiting for one of them to reach for power. But it is probably our perception that this leaderless floating must come to an end. Taliban leaders are always leaders in tribal society. They are used to living without leadership, purpose, or program.

What is new for the Taliban in government positions is that they are actually also supposed to ensure the functioning of specialized ministries. But almost all of them lack any competence to do so. The Taliban have filled all decision-making positions in government agencies with their own people. Among them are no experts capable of making competent decisions in the ministries of mining or health or transportation. Only the lowest ranks of the ministries are still occupied by officials who worked there before the Taliban. But these lower ranks do not have the expertise that the minister would need in order for his ministry to fulfill its tasks.

**On working with Taliban government structures:** A sad chapter is OFARIN's relationship with its partner ministry, the Ministry of Religious Affairs. OFARIN's program was created in cooperation with this ministry during the time of the old Taliban. The cooperation was successful for a long time. The minister now appointed by the Taliban made a nephew Ra'is and put him in charge of the department responsible for cooperation with OFARIN. The protocol, i.e., the basic agreement for cooperation between the ministry and OFARIN, has expired. A new protocol needs to be concluded. The Ra'is explained after our arrival in August that he would set conditions for this. He would send them to us in writing. If we rejected them, we would have to look for another partner. These conditions have not yet been met, i.e. at the end of October.

OFARIN had not paid wages to its teachers for months because the Ministry had to give written approval for each month but did not do so. OFARIN asked the Ra'is in writing for approval of the additional payments due. We were then prohibited by letter from making the payments until a new protocol was completed. We were also forbidden in writing to give lessons until a protocol was in place. This outraged the trainers who meet with us every two weeks. The male trainers demanded a meeting with the Ra'is. They wanted to know how to deal with this decision. The Ra'is received our trainers and claimed never to have written such letters to our office. In fact, the classes will continue to be taught by the instructors. In order not to jeopardize this continued operation, the staff of OFARIN's office does not attend classes.

It cannot be ruled out that the Ra'is really did not notice what his department wrote to OFARIN on his behalf. The letters are written in Dari. The Ra'is cannot read that. The letters were written by subordinates who had been working in subordinate positions in the department responsible for OFARIN for years. Some of these subordinate employees, had demanded several times to be put on OFARIN's payroll. We refused to accept such bribes. Now they could pay us back. Ra'is had signed the hostile letters without understanding them. But it could have been otherwise.

Last week, I was asked to visit this department with a co-worker. There, the subordinates of the Ra'is presented us with the conditions that the department had worked out for further cooperation. Our teachers and trainers would have to be examined by the department before they were allowed to continue working. Purchases of teaching materials, such as notebooks and pencils, would have to be supervised by the Ministry or made by the Ministry itself. OFARIN must submit financial reports to the Ministry of Economy every six months. In the future, such reports should go monthly to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Other conditions followed. I will spare you details, because I too had long since switched off at the meeting and stopped listening to the individual impositions. We could not enter into such a toxic partnership. We asked for a written statement of the conditions. This was promised for the next day, but did not come. Instead, the Ra'is submitted its own conditions: Much more religious instruction had to be included in the curriculum. Again we asked for it to be sent. OFARIN has long sought partnerships with other ministries. As soon as such a new relationship is finalized, we will inform the Ministry of Religious Affairs that we reject its conditions, even if they still have not reached us.

What has happened to OFARIN's partnership with the Ministry of Religious Affairs since the Taliban arrived? The Taliban have appointed a Ra'is who is overwhelmed with the partnership in terms of content but also technically. He cannot read the department's correspondence. Subordinate officials who have always been there take this task from him. The Ra'is does not know what the officials are doing. They are shaping the partnership as they see it. They want to control the use of other people's money down to the last detail. So they create quite a few opportunities to block the work and then demand bribes to unblock it.

As here, the Afghan administration is losing top-down control in many places. The Taliban appoint decision-makers who are overwhelmed with their task and get many things wrong. Subordinate administrators make decisions according to their own whims instead of the person formally in charge.

It is also bad that the Taliban leaders disagree on many issues. They have never tried to discuss opposites in order to find common positions. If anyone is faced with a decision now, he knows or suspects which of the leaders will disagree with it. They will protest loudly and make it clear that the decision cannot be supported by the Taliban leadership. It must then be reversed. Those who do not want to make themselves unpopular would rather not make a decision at all.

Everywhere, people are waiting for decisions. Requests from citizens are not answered. Investments are not made. What is not yet completely stagnant takes time, an infinite amount of time.

A frightening aspect occurred during the discussion with the Ra'is responsible for us in the Ministry of Religion. The Ra'is grew up in a village in the outskirts of Kabul. But his life experience is not very different from that of other Taliban who have lived in the mountains or on the steppe. In the village school, he learned quite a bit about the Islamic religion. He knows how to strictly separate good from evil and enemy from friend. At first, OFARIN's office contacts with the Ra'is were matter-of-factly professional. But when I visited him in his department, the issue was a lengthy letter from his department specifying how our classes were to take place in the Afghan emirate. Our office had duplicated the letter, as it should be, and distributed it to the trainers in the various areas where we are active. This letter was published in an Iranian illustrated magazine. The Ra'is showed me on his cell phone pictures of girls' classes that had appeared to accompany the article. The text that had been sent to our office by his department had been altered by a staff member of our office and launched to the Iranian newspaper in order to malign the Emirate of Taliban in Iran. Apparently, the text that our office had dutifully distributed had been shown to Iranian journalists by a teacher or a

trainer. So it was printed in the Iranian Illustrated, but unchanged. The journalists did not need to alter the text to ridicule the Taliban emirate. The unchanged text already took care of that.

This pretty story has it all. The good Ra'is has internalized all the prejudices of a Pashtun Sunni. Thus, he immediately recognized that our collaborator, a Shi'ite, was an Iranian spy.

Afghan colleagues urged me to make the colleague suspected of spying disappear for a few weeks. He should not be seen in the office and move to relatives in the province. The Ra'is, he said, had become engrossed in his vision and had also expressed to others that our colleague was an Iranian spy. If a Taliban commando came now and arrested the colleague, we could not help. I agreed. The colleague will return to the office when we have nothing more to do with the Ministry of Ra'is.

That is the legal position of ordinary citizens in the Taliban empire. Every official who belongs to the Taliban is the master of a small kingdom in which he can judge as he pleases. Other Taliban hardly interfere in the domain of such a petty king's rule. The fact that an Afghan who has worked for a foreign organization or even for the military, e.g., as a translator, has now lived unmolested for more than a year is no guarantee that he is not in danger.

**What have we achieved?** We are about to go home. Yesterday we had accomplished something: After eight weeks of diligent drilling, we received exit-reentry visas for half a year. With this, one can enter and leave the country at any time. Maybe this effort was superfluous. But it takes longer and longer to wring something out of Afghan authorities. Who knows how long it would take if we had to apply for a visa in the spring?

During our entire stay, two or three staff members were always busy writing applications for these visas, running from the office to the ministry and back, and carrying the necessary documents. Sometimes they only had to go to one ministry to carry the documents from one department to another. Most of the time the Ra'is in charge was not present, sometimes no one from the staff could be found. Then Anne Marie and I were asked to sign employment contracts with OFARIN. In the case of OFARIN, these are not required under German association law and consequently do not exist. But before we had thought about how to explain German association law to Afghan bureaucrats, OFARIN's office had printed out employment contracts that we just had to sign.

**New perspectives:** At least as costly, after a fumbling beginning, are OFARIN's efforts to contact other ministries with the goal of finding new partners. Long accounts of OFARIN's activities were written in Dari and Pashto. Then the Ministry of Education was visited. There is a department there where partners can implement their own teaching concepts without such projects being considered parts of the state school system. However, it is possible to grow into the state program at a later stage. This concept fits well with OFARIN's medium-term intentions.

Qari Sediq, OFARIN's head trainer in Qalacha, had created the necessary personal relationship. The deputy minister responsible for this branch of the Ministry of Education lives in Qalacha. He knows our program and was pleased that OFARIN approached him. Something should come of it - but when?

Foreign aid organizations are registered with the Ministry of Economy. Besides this relationship, the foreign organization needs a specialized ministry as a partner. This partnership must be applied for through the Ministry of Economy. For this purpose, one has to give an incredible amount of information to the Ministry of Economy. It is also necessary to provide a lot of information to the future partner ministry, and also to make some commitments. For example, you have to specify in which province you will set up how many classes. An aid organization that lives off the donations of its compatriots starts to sweat over such specifications, because after a few months the funding may no longer be sufficient for the specified number of classes, or the organization would like to open up

new areas for teaching. It is said that it is easy to change a decision once it has been made. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up when I hear something like that. I smell paperwork and bureaucratic arbitrariness. The friendly reception by high dignitaries in the Ministry of Education is one thing. The other is the cooperation with the subordinate officials.

But at least, in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, neither the leadership nor the lower bureaucrats show even the slightest interest in OFARIN's doings. We also received a friendly welcome at the Ministry of Border Affairs and Tribal Affairs. This ministry is also responsible for some schools and would like to cooperate with us. However, despite these encouraging welcomes, it will take patience for us to establish constructive working relationships with new partners.

Ultimately, it is critical that OFARIN's work is seen by some influential people as valuable to the future of Afghanistan. We need some protection and some promotion. I probably had too high hopes when we traveled to Afghanistan that we would quickly encounter such supporters. After all, in 1998 I had stumbled into such a group of influential Taliban who were looking for allies to promote schools and education. At that time, I was a rank beginner. This time, we already have an excellent program. Still, the funders are not imposing themselves.

But that will come. The insistent call for education is coming from all parts of the population. As long as the Taliban try to ignore this call, they will only have stagnation to offer. That will not be possible for long. What is currently offered as education in Afghanistan is junk and mostly still costs money. Afghanistan is not capable of developing proper instructional programs on its own. OFARIN's program is an unbeatable proposition. It will catch on.

So our stay has not yet brought the breakthrough to successful work. But we have created the conditions for it. The exit from the unpleasant and perspective-less partnership with the Ministry of Religious Affairs has been initiated. We are no longer just staring at the next threat that the Ra'is and his colleagues might come up with, and our minds are free to plan for the future.

It was gratifying for us to see the work of our Kabul office up close. Everything simply works here. The mutual consideration of colleagues for each other is simply great. The openness in working together is also wonderful. If someone is absent for a longer period of time, enough others know where which correspondence is filed. There is no secrecy. We have to thank our manager Abdul Hussain Khavari for this climate in which everyone can feel comfortable. He made it work this way. But everyone was happy to participate.

This also made it possible to cope with the very sudden loss of Zakeer Akbari. This brilliant accountant - I know that seems to be a contradiction in terms. But anyone who has experienced Zakeer knows that an accountant can be brilliant. - So Zakeer took an opportunity to emigrate to Australia. Now he is sticking tiles on the wall there together with relatives. We miss him as a dear friend. But as an accountant we don't miss him at all. After all, Hewad Tanai had grown up next to Zakeer, and in the meantime he has mastered everything we need in accounting. Nevertheless, we would be very happy if Zakeer were with us again.

Excuse me for saying sentimental stuff! But, if you had been here for the ten weeks, you too would feel the need to praise our Afghan colleagues.

Best regards,

*Peter Schwittek.*