

Newsletter, December 17, 2021

Dear Friends,

The efforts of our Kabul colleagues to arrange with our partner ministry for the resumption of classes have been arduous. In November, a head had been appointed for the department responsible for us in this ministry. OFARIN's office manager Abdul Hussain had visited the new head of the department and asked the questions that are important to us: When can we start teaching again? What about the classes for female students and the cooperation of female trainers, teachers and other office staff? Our employees continue to face imprisonment because they work for a Western organization. Will our employees and their families be protected from attacks in the future? The head of the department was overwhelmed. He had to clarify all our questions with senior Taliban.

A week ago, he still had no answers to our questions. Abdul Hussain was there with Naqib, one of our Pashtun colleagues. Both made it clear that we are anxious to know what happens next. Our donors are currently funding the idling of the OFARIN apparatus. They will not do so forever. If the Ministry of Religious Affairs does not offer us a perspective soon, we would have to talk to other ministries about a partnership. The plain language of our people impressed the head of the department. He promised to know in a week. But now the minister with whom he wanted to clarify issues is out of town.

Remember what I wrote in the October newsletter about the Pashtuns' decision-making process? They follow the time-consuming rites in their tribal assemblies. We will need a lot more patience. The Taliban are far from being organized enough to assess the aid organizations that are now offering themselves as partners and to start working with them. Some organizations have been allowed to begin work in limited areas on a provisional basis. They must wait for final decisions. The Taliban want to inspect the offices of all aid organizations. Until then, there are at best only provisional results.

The issue is probably not only the content and modalities of the work of aid organizations, but also the power within the Taliban factions. In Afghanistan, people talk about the antagonism between the Khosti and the Kandahari. The Kandahari are the representatives of the "old Taliban." Some of them were already ministers until 2001. The Kandahari are based on the warriors in the countryside. These are farmers or nomads who occasionally took part in raids on transports or bases of the government or foreigners in their closer homeland. This suited the warlike mentality of these men. Attacks in large cities, on the other hand, were carried out by specialists from the Haqqani network. This is led by the Haqqani clan, which is based in Khost province.

What do the Taliban want? What do they say about their own intentions? Are there principles that are indispensable to them? Officially, the Taliban are only making it clear that everything in their domain must be governed by Sharia law. One cringes. Sharia law means that thieves have their hands chopped off and adulterers (especially adulteresses) are stoned to death. Presumably, the first thing that comes to mind when Taliban hear "Sharia" is these brutal punishments.

Did you know that Sharia does not allow forced marriages? If a girl rejects the suitor that her father has negotiated with her potential father-in-law, the girl is not allowed to be married. This Sharia law is known to many lay people in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, neither the Taliban government nor any significant number of citizens will abide by this law. One acquaintance is a German-Iranian and Muslim who is a professor of human rights and international law in Vienna. He moans: "If only we had Sharia law in Afghanistan. The law in Afghanistan is pre-Islamic tribal law."

When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan before 2002, men who trimmed their beards or even shaved were thrown into prison. This was because the Prophet had allowed his beard to grow wild, and since he is a role model for all believers, even they are not allowed to maintain it. Sharia, on the other hand, leaves it up to the believer to trim his beard or not. Presumably, most Taliban consider the self-invented beard law to be Sharia law.

The Sharia was canonized more than 200 years after the Prophet's death. It was intended to regulate the coexistence of all Muslims. At that time, the Islamic territories stretched from India to Spain. The peoples who lived there had very different traditions and customs. Only a few laws applied to all. Many Sharia laws applied only to certain regions. From the beginning, the Sharia system had many possibilities for making exceptions. Many rules could be suspended for a limited or unlimited period.

For peoples in the southern Sahara, the law of the sleeping fetus applied for centuries. The men there often traveled for years with their camels on trade journeys or war campaigns. They inserted the possibility into regional sharia law that a fetus could sleep in the womb for a long time before developing and being born. This contributed significantly to legal peace.

The great flexibility of Sharia law gave rise to the idea of interpreting this law in a way that is compatible with all the requirements of the UN Convention on Human Rights. The Iranian Shirin Ebadi elaborated this approach. She proved that it is possible. For this she was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003. The Mullah regime did not like this interpretation of Sharia law. Ms. Ebadi was forced to leave her homeland.

The Taliban, too, certainly do not agree with every canon of law that would fit under the term Sharia. Obviously, their concrete policies pursue goals that cannot be justified by Sharia law. In the peace negotiations with the United States, they promised the appropriate participation of all ethnic groups in government. This pledge does not contradict sharia law, nor does it contradict the Taliban's narrow understanding of it. Why, nevertheless, are they not fulfilling the pledge?

So the Taliban are very generous with Sharia law. Few of them are likely to be aware of the great flexibility that this legal system offers. Some Sharia laws that they do know, the Taliban ignore when they don't suit them. Instead, they have invented rigorous laws that are not Sharia but that they believe to be Sharia law. The Taliban's single and oft-repeated statement about the principles of their actions, namely that they act according to sharia law, is thus hardly reliable.

If there are no principles that they represent, why do the Taliban intervene extremely massively in the lives of other Afghans? Obviously, they represent certain interests. These certainly include the interests of the Taliban's leading ethnic group, the Pashtuns. There are interests of certain directions within Sunni Islam. There are certainly also the interests of foreign powers. None of these interests is openly stated. And it is difficult from a distance to assess and weigh these interests against each other.

What the enforcement of these interests means could be learned during the rule of the old Taliban: the complete oppression of women, the domination of the Pashtuns, the humiliation of many people, the oppression of other Islamic confessions, the destruction of educational institutions, the destruction of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic cultural heritage, the killing of all economic initiatives and activities.

Meanwhile, the economic situation is rapidly deteriorating. Lack of rainfall has led to poor harvests. Before the Taliban took power, Afghanistan's civil service was financed largely by the international community. The previous government was able to cover a smaller portion of government

expenditures from taxes and fees. But since the Taliban came to power, no one collects taxes anymore. In short, Afghanistan has no revenue.

It is completely dependent on international aid. This dependence on foreign aid gives the international community the opportunity to impose conditions.

The Taliban have won a war against the West and its ideals. Women's equality, human rights according to the UN Convention, religious freedom and many other things that are indispensable to us have lost the war in Afghanistan. Can we use the emergency situation to assert our ideals after all?

In the peace negotiations in Doha, a number of things were agreed upon with the Taliban. In the distribution of power, all ethnic groups were to be given a fair share. Women were not to be completely deprived of their rights. What exactly was agreed in the negotiations and how binding it is, I don't know. At least these vague commitments give Western diplomats the opportunity to object to particularly blatant undesirable developments and to prevent them by linking them to conditions for humanitarian aid.

But should we not go further? Are equal rights for women or religious freedom worth nothing to us? Afghanistan's plight offers the chance to achieve more now.

Here, we should pause and realize what we would be accomplishing in this way. Perhaps we could force the Taliban government to sign an agreement recognizing equal rights for women. We could only force the Taliban to do that with an enormous amount of manpower. That is unrealistic.

Before even considering how to reverse the outcome of the Taliban war, it is better to ask how it came about and who was fighting for what.

Afghanistan has been a divided country since 1919 at the latest. Even before World War I, some wealthy Afghans had travelled as far as Europe or even America. There they saw factories where the most fantastic products were produced quickly and at low prices. They rode in railroads from one city to the next. They saw the youth of the host countries studying theories in schools and universities that the wisest men of Afghanistan had never heard of. In clinics, diseases were cured that no one in Afghanistan would survive. The traveling Afghans were ashamed of how backward their country was. Back home, they pushed for Afghanistan to be organized like a modern country.

In 1919, King Amanullah ascended the Afghan throne. He was ready to catapult his country into the future. Conscription was introduced, as was compulsory education. A code of laws was created and judges and prosecutors. The administration was divided into specialized ministries. Many civil servants were hired. The future had begun. Afghanistan became modern. It no longer had to hide from Italy or England.

The modernists, the supporters of progress, rejoiced. For them, civil servants were the personification of the new era. They were celebrated and honored. The state was able to keep order with its administration. Now not every Afghan could build a house or open a business where it suited him. The state determined where it was desirable and where it was not. Citizens had to submit an application if they wanted to build a house. The administration decided whether the house complied with the state planning. In this way, state planning could be enforced - and corruption could flourish. Many civil servants did not understand their duties. No one could instruct them in their duties. The Ministry of Education was supposed to oversee education in the schools. But most of the ministry's officials had never been to school themselves. Nevertheless, many hopes were associated with them.

The nomads, the farmers and the small craftsmen in the cities were more skeptical. Why should their children go to school? They needed them for the work in the family. And sending their sons to the military was even more of an imposition. Why did they imitate everything that existed in the countries of the infidels? In the past, the administration of justice was in the hands of religiously trained kadis. Now one could also fight for one's rights before a state court. Did they want to weaken the power of the clergy? Many mullahs thought so. They distrusted the innovations and encouraged large parts of the population in their defensive attitude. They preached that it was a sin to send one's children to state schools.

Belief in the blessings of modernity and the rule of the state and its bureaucracy was a substitute religion, an ideology, for its adherents. Traditionalism, rejection of modernization, distrust of the state and support for the mullahs was the counter-ideology. In 1929, tensions erupted in a terrible uprising. King Amanullah abdicated and went abroad to limit the bloodshed. It took effort to restore order. In the decades that followed, modernists, who believed the state would bring progress and happiness, and traditionalists, who feared for their identity and religion, lived side by side in fierce hostility.

In 1978, Afghan communists seized power. Even more energetic than Amanullah, the communists wanted to lead Afghanistan to an even better future through the rule of the state. They also threatened religion and traditions. Military resistance rose up. The Soviet Union sent its own troops. Western and Islamic countries supported the Afghan resistance.

In 1992, the Communists were defeated. But now the traditionalist parties, rich in victories, fought bitterly for power. Another party, the Taliban movement, emerged during this civil war. Their traditionalist ideology, with its Islamic precepts, goes well beyond the traditional religious practice of Afghans. The Taliban won the upper hand in the civil war. But they did not succeed in conquering the whole country, although they were strongly supported by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Islamists from other countries.

One of these Islamists was the Arab Osama bin Laden. He planned and organized attacks from Afghanistan all over the world. In particular, the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States can be traced back to him. The USA asked the Taliban to expel bin Laden. The Taliban refused. The U.S. attacked the Taliban with air power. The Taliban fled.

The world community decided to make Afghanistan a functioning, stable state. Never again should terrorists be able to plan attacks from here. Based on the experience of 1992, when the victors fell upon the communists in a civil war, it was decided to stabilize the new beginning by sending the international troop contingent ISAF. The form of government in Afghanistan was to be democracy.

The countries that planned Afghanistan's new beginning could only think of this form of government. After all, they were democracies themselves. The Afghans had no choice. They had not experienced democracy before.

Initially, the ISAF did not include American troops. The U.S. sent its own contingent to fight terrorism. What that meant was unclear. The hostile appearance of these troops suggests that it was a revenge campaign for the attacks of 9/11/2001. In any case, this U.S. contingent contributed greatly to the revival of the Taliban movement. Later, U.S. troops and ISAF were combined, which only added to the damage.

To the traditionalists, the nations that sought to rebuild the state were infidels. Thus, at the very least, these countries were enemies of Islam, because for Muslims, there is no religion that can be on equal footing with Islam. What was to be imposed on the Afghans in the form of democracy also

violated tradition: Equal rights for women, the equal status of all religions and ethnic groups – this went far beyond what King Amanullah wanted to impose on his people.

For the traditionalists, the attempt to install a democracy was only a continuation of the modernizers and their infidel helpers to destroy the country's traditions and its religion. The modernists joined the new attempt listlessly. Sure, democracy was also supposed to create a strong government that ruled the country with the help of a bureaucracy. But many people did not like the foreign direction of this new beginning, especially since it made numerous mistakes. Nevertheless, the majority of modernists went along with it, but they did not stand behind it. It was not their thing.

Basically, the division of society persisted and has not been pacified with the victory of the Taliban. Large parts of the population now want to leave their country. The Taliban have no concept of developing Afghanistan into a country that can connect to economic and social life and eventually become an equal member of the international community.

Afghanistan must find its inner peace and reduce the antagonisms in society. A common perspective for all Afghans can be an entry point to balance and reconciliation. You may laugh at me now, but I am convinced that our program can contribute to this.

The experiences I had with the "old Taliban" up to 2001 give me the courage to make a fool of myself. At that time, I learned that the Taliban movement was made up of very diverse people. Even in higher positions there were men who were very relaxed about the rigorous self-made laws of their movement. They invited us to work together to undermine the ban on girls going to school. Many were eager to learn from us strangers. And the mullahs in "our mosques" defended our lessons resolutely against the hardliners. Before and after the Taliban's ouster at that time, our lessons instilled a lot of trust and common ground among all concerned. Students, teachers and their supervisors are happy about their learning together. A sense of community develops. Courage to start something new emerges.

OFARIN's lessons impart elementary school knowledge and thus personal self-confidence as well as a sense of community. What the people concerned make of it is not in our hands. OFARIN helps to lay the foundation. Without it, no economic and technological new beginning is conceivable. It is also part of an emotional basis for a courageous new beginning together. Which path the Afghans will ultimately choose is up to them.

I send you my warmest greetings and wish you a Merry Christmas and all the best for the New Year,
Peter Schwittek.