

Newsletter, July 10, 2021

Dear friends,

So we are in Kabul. Our journalistic guests have flown back home after collecting a lot of information and pictures about OFARIN and the schools. Their main report will be part of a series of reports about school education in developing countries, which will be printed in a number of about 30 German newspapers. The leading medium of this "Frankfurter Gruppe" will be the "Frankfurter Rundschau", where these reports will first appear. The report on Afghanistan will appear in the FR after July 21 and before August 1, in the other papers somewhat later. In addition, our guests have prepared radio reports for WDR. If we find out more details about the publication dates in time, we will pass it on. We will also put the reports on our homepage.

Of course, on such occasions we learn more precisely and intensively how our lessons are received by our students and their environment. But I want to hold back and let the journalists take the lead. One should spare oneself praise as long as others praise one. If we think we need to add to the reports of our guests, we will do so after they appear.

OFARIN's office and its staff are working in an exemplary manner. The garden of the office has become narrow. The crowns of the trees have expanded vigorously. We will harvest what feels like a ton of figs. Sparrows and pigeons fly crisscrossing the garden.

We sit on the porch. At 9:00 it is 30 degrees. Wind indicates that it will get much warmer as the day progresses. A group of colleagues has gone with an employee of the Ministry of Religious Affairs to pay wages for the teachers in Ser-e-Kotal. Government schools are closed because of Corona. OFARIN has also asked its classes to close. But some of our classes have decided to continue classes anyway.

No one is keeping track of the Corona situation. Some staff members were vaccinated - with Indian or Chinese vaccine. Most became already sick. Engineer Hamid spent the last week at his mother's bedside until she died of the disease.

There is noise from the street. Merchants, are on the road with carts and praise their vegetables with loudspeakers. Crowds of ice cream sellers push small carts in front of them and advertise their company with the same songs: "Jingle Bells", "Für Elise" and "Happy Birthday to you". Helicopters fly diligently as before, even though they are now only used by the government. At a given time, the Mullah makes the - qualitatively far most appealing - contribution to the general noise.

Yes, our road - when we were last here in the fall of 2019, they had begun to pave it. Now it's finished. As with many roads, part of the new surface had to be torn up again because pipes had to be laid underneath. This is not usually the result of negligence, but is a sign of cockfighting in the road construction administration. Be that as it may! The road is now paved and so are many roads in residential areas. On trips to areas where our classes are held, we are surprised by new connecting roads. Arterial roads are being widened. One of our guests has been to Kabul many times. He says, "It's just not true what some of my colleagues write, that nothing has been built." He is right. Interurban roads have also been built. However, they were destroyed again by the Taliban in contested areas. Perhaps this can be justified by military tactical considerations. But one can also assume that the Taliban's Pakistani backers are trying to keep Afghanistan technologically stuck in the Middle Ages.

Much has been done in Kabul in the area of building construction as well. Money is there and has not only migrated to Dubai. There are hardly any statistics on this. We have to rely on our own eye

impression. It is noticeable that there is a lot of vacancy in finished high-rise buildings. For reasons of prestige, people build high and splendidly on the outside. Then we learn that last fall it was discovered that it would have been better to install a heating system in the representative building over there. In the winter, part of the fine stucco of the staircase building had to give way to simple iron pipes. A German engineer says that he never leans against the outer wall of a room in a new Afghan building. It is only one stone thick and you never know.

A former OFARIN student has become a proficient iron bender. He is working on the reinforcement of a high-rise residential building. We visit him at his workplace. The construction site is like the ones I worked on as a student in Germany. Three blocks are being built here. After six years, the buildings has reached a height of eleven stories. After how many years? Yes, after six years. Sometimes there was no construction because there was no money. Also, further construction was interrupted because of Corona. The blocks are to be 15 stories high, maybe 25. Presumably, there is an upper limit on the height of buildings in the city, which it is hoped will one day fall. The client is the Ministry of Housing. The contractor is a private company. Two-, three- and five-bedroom apartments for teachers are being built. The teacher is to pay \$600 per square meter. Excuse me? Yes, the teachers get a loan that they pay off in 15 years. The teacher earns, conversely, at most \$100 a month. We are pretty sure that the three blocks will not be finished after another six years and that even then the story will not pay off, neither for the teachers nor for the state. It does not detract from the performance of our iron bender that there is a whiff of corruption in the air.

Yes, a lot has happened in Afghanistan since 2002. Several mobile phone systems are complementing each other. There are efficient banks. The ministries of finance and economics also seem to have become much more efficient than they ever were.

In the past, the emir ruled. He appointed gentlemen as tax collectors. They appeared with the sovereign attitude of the ruler's appointees. How much they collected was up to them. It had to be enough only for the share, which was entitled to the emir. The tax collectors appointed sub-tax collectors and so on.

During World War I, a German-Austrian military delegation made its way to Kabul and tried to persuade Emir Habibullah to wage war against British India. This failed. But the delegation was able to convince other members of the royal house and young nobles of the advantages of a modern state, of compulsory military service and compulsory education, of a judiciary organized by the state, and of an administration run as centrally as possible. In 1919, Emir Habibullah was followed by King Amanullah. He was enthusiastic about the new ideas and carried out reforms. An administration was created with specialized ministries. Everything had to be decided from the capital. For many Afghans, the modern era began. Their country was organized like England or Italy. Being in favor of the new administration was a political stance. The other Afghans were uneducated and backward. The spokesmen of the urban elites encouraged the new administration in its conceits. The new administrators cultivated the same sovereign arrogance as the emir's beaules who collected the taxes.

For the communists, who had come to power in the meantime, such state officials corresponded exactly to their ideas and desires. Laws were created that made it virtually impossible to dismiss state servants.

This did not change after 2002. The rules that were supposed to ensure mutual control between government and parliament made it easy to dismiss ministers. Civil servants sat in their safe chairs and saw many ministers come and go.

Officials refined laws and regulations more and more to control everything and make it harder and harder for more and more citizens to get government services or permits. If a citizen needs a signature or a stamp, the only way to get it is to pay large bribes.

This administration practically considers itself the owner of the state and the authority of all citizens. It has no responsibility of its own for the country and for the general public. The international community has financed this administration for two decades. It had the means to shape this administration differently. Instead, billions of dollars and euros have been given to this administration without any conditions or control. Certainly, the international community does not have the personnel to monitor every Afghan official. But it could and should have discussed every monthly allocation with every minister and their top administrators. The allocations should have been decided jointly and, after fixed deadlines, jointly reviewed to see what had been implemented. This would have made it clear to the minister and his administrative leaders how to handle public funds. It would have taken them a while to comply. But over the course of 20 years, the attitudes imposed on them would have been internalized by their subordinate agencies as well. It is not that the correct handling of public funds is completely alien to Afghan culture. Afghans know very well how to distinguish between good and evil in this area as well. And most people are even grateful for being helped to stay on the right track.

Another problem is posed by specialized ministries, such as the Ministry of Education. Such a ministry would have to develop regulations for successful schooling. The Afghan Ministry of Education does issue regulations for school instruction. But they almost never serve the success of the lessons. This is because there are simply no experts for halfway successful teaching in Afghanistan – neither in the ministry, nor in the schools, nor at the university. "Afghanistan can't do schools." Foreign experts have presumably realized this as well, but they have seen no way to change it with their own bureaucratic apparatuses like USAID or GIZ. Therefore, they relegated the schools to the realm of Afghan sovereignty, which allowed them to avoid the problem. One can only strongly recommend the Western countries to review their own development aid bureaucracies.

Dear friends, some of you will be disappointed: Now the guy and his wife are finally in Afghanistan and still he doesn't report how things are going. What did they expect? What my colleagues and I can say about the situation was in the previous newsletters. My Afghan colleagues and I already knew more about the overall situation beforehand than most of the young, courageous journalists who are now being quickly sent to Afghanistan because of the troop withdrawal. How am I supposed to learn anything here and now that goes beyond my previous knowledge? Even if decision-makers of the Taliban or the government crossed my path, they would not tell me what their plans are. If the government and the Taliban are serious about negotiating the future of their country now, they will do it where no one can listen to them. I just hope they do just that.

Otherwise, I want to give you my new Afghan phone number (0093-799 545 934) and my wife Anne Marie's (0093-799 545 930). But if you should dial one of these numbers to find out what about the future of Afghanistan and the Taliban, we will hang up immediately.

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)