

Newsletter, JULY 21, 2023

Dear Friends,

The June newsletter was written soon after we returned from Afghanistan. At that time, we were able to continue our classes. Officially, girls were allowed to study only up to grade six. Women were generally not allowed to study. At first glance, this did not affect OFARIN, because we only offer elementary education, which according to the official Afghan curriculum should be completed by grade four. But the restriction "up to grade six" probably refers not to the school subject matter but to the age of the students. And since the performance of Afghan schools is incredibly poor and some of the women had not gone to school at all before, a relatively large number of adult women and young girls attended our classes before the Taliban returned. Now that was only possible again on a modest scale. We hoped that, with the acquiescence of the authorities, we could unofficially expand classes for women and girls again.

In the June newsletter, I explained that the kind of confrontation that international officials are used to in their home countries is inappropriate against Taliban chiefs. Afghans – not just Taliban – who make it to leadership positions have been raised by their families to be macho. They expect others to respect them as an authority and fear "losing face. "They can't take it if someone contradicts them in front of an audience. You can't solve problems with them in public confrontation. It is terrible for them to be contradicted by women representing international organizations and threatened with withdrawal of funds if they do not change their policies.

After senior Taliban leaders experienced such things, they called all female employees of international organizations "insolent" and forbade them to enter their workplaces in the offices. Exceptions were made for female employees of medical and educational programs. They were allowed to work in hospitals, laboratories and schools, but not in offices. All of this, mind you, did not apply to Afghan aid workers.

We didn't take it too seriously that our female colleagues weren't allowed to come into the office. Nevertheless, it was a nuisance. But we could live with it. It was more important that our lessons took place. People's desire for education was expressed to us from many sides. High officials of the Ministry of Education and provincial authorities – they are always Taliban, mostly mullahs – urged us to expand our program. We had no doubts: the desire to teach would prevail.

But no sooner had the June newsletter been sent out than we were spooked by news from Afghanistan. Our office had been informed by telephone that international aid organizations were to suspend classes until further notice. The reasoning and instructions for the execution would still be provided in writing. But so far – four weeks have passed in the meantime – this has not happened. Instead, indefinite vacations have been ordered throughout Afghanistan because of the summer heat. Some of our classes asked to be allowed to continue working. We have allowed them to do so.

Even though I have already said quite a bit about this in previous newsletters, I will now take a step back to gain an overview:

King Amanullah had ruled Afghanistan since 1919. He wanted to make his country "modern" – like America or the countries in Europe. Something similar took place in Turkey at about the same time. Amanullah created a cabinet with specialized ministries and legions of civil servants. He decreed compulsory education and conscription. A small urban elite welcomed this dawn of modernity. But most Afghans saw no point in these measures, which involved considerable interference in their family lives. "Why should it be the same for us as for the infidels?" they asked themselves. The influence of the Islamic clergy, e.g., the religiously trained kidis in the legal system, was restricted. Children used to attend the mosque for religious instruction. Some even learned to write and read from the mullah. Now the mullah had to share his influence over the youth with the teacher. The clergy feared that religion was to be pushed out of people's lives, and began to push back against the government's innovations. Mullahs proclaimed that it was a sin to send children to government schools. School was a main battle ground between tradition and modernity.

In 1929, Amanullah was forced to abdicate because armed resistance arose against his reforms. After that, modernists and traditionalists lived side by side in bitter hostility. In 1978, the Communists tried to impose their brand of modernism by force and failed. After much bloodshed, the Taliban asserted themselves as defenders of traditional tribal life and Islam. The Taliban also fought against schools, especially girls' schools. Most Taliban warriors did not go to school themselves. They feared schools because they had a dim suspicion that going to school would create job prospects that they missed out on.

But by now, many Afghans had long understood that the future cannot be won without schooling. Television and cell phones do not work on the basis of tribal traditions and Sharia law. Many Afghans had toiled in Arabia and Iran. They had to submit to Europeans, Indians and Palestinians because they have better schooling. The majority of Taliban ministers and their followers had long understood that Afghanistan's population needed a solid education.

The defense minister and the interior minister are vehemently committed to schools. But some leading Taliban are still fighting King Amanullah's schools, especially the head of state, the Emir Hobaitullah. He has ordered that girls go to school only up to the sixth grade and are not allowed to study. People have a hard time with the backward-looking man, especially since he received his post as a relatively unknown embarrassment candidate. But now he is the leader of the faithful, that is, a religious authority. This is not the only reason why he should not be underestimated. Through his orders on girls' schools and women's studies, he has probably risen to become the leader of a strong proportion of active Taliban fighters. Most importantly, everything is now deadlocked. Advocates of schools are campaigning for tuition and education. But they cannot openly contradict the Emir's order. The head of state could not stand for that. The Taliban movement would blow up. So, the Taliban are content to reject the criticism of international organizations together and to look for internal solutions.

In the process, they come up with a number of ideas. Officials in the Ministry of Education, for example, told our staff that OFARIN was not an "international" organization, but a

"foreign" one. This would put us on an equal footing with Afghan organizations with regard to the stay of our female employees. Our ladies could go back to work in the office.

In fact, small aid organizations registered in another country, such as Germany, and active only in Afghanistan, are not the ones protesting Taliban decisions. Large organizations like Caritas or the Agha Khan Foundation, which are active in many developing countries, have to defend their principles, which are valid worldwide. They cannot put up with something in Afghanistan that they oppose in Vietnam or Zimbabwe. The distinction between international and foreign organizations was a well-intentioned slyness by Afghan officials. Unfortunately, it is not covered by our official status.

We will need some more patience and good nerves. But we are convinced that normal school operations in Afghanistan cannot be prevented for much longer. We plan to travel to Afghanistan again in a good month and will keep you informed.

Kind regards

Peter Schwittekk.