



Interview with

Frank Hantke

Head of the
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Afghanistan Office

Today, we are talking to Frank Hantke, Head of the Kabul Office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Mr. Hantke, you were present at the second Kabul conference. What is your evaluation of events? How did the election of the delegates go?

Hantke: The election of the delegates definitely did not proceed without argument, but went quite well in the end. Initially, there were discussions about the election procedure. It was then agreed that the representatives for the regions and for the urban areas would vote separately amongst themselves. In the end, quite a good selection of delegates emerged. Overall, the process went pretty well. The paper, which is to be approved, was discussed once more and will be approved during the task force session on 30th October and forwarded on that day as well.

How do you currently see the situation in Afghanistan, especially with regard to the situation of civil society? What is the mood amongst Afghan NGOs on the ground at the moment?

Hantke: The mood is not upbeat, the situation is very difficult. Of course the civil society organisations, which incidentally cannot necessarily be equated to civil society or taken to represent it, see the discussions about the withdrawal with great anxiety. They are worried that the help given to them will stop too quickly and too abruptly. And it won't be possible to establish anything quickly in this country by local efforts alone, which means that overall people are rather anxious about the future.

What is the mood amongst members of the government?

Hantke: If I knew that I'd be happy. There is no homogeneous government in Afghanistan. The government involves virtually all parties, including parties that are hostile to one another, and they are all represented by ministers or deputy ministers. So you can't talk about the mood of the members of the government, but at most of the mood of individual members of the government. Overall, it is a very difficult and confused situation – and that therefore also comes through in the statements made by members of the government.

How significant has the influence of civil society been to date in your opinion and how do you think this influence will develop in the future?

Hantke: Well, I think that the influence that civil society has on political decision-making processes is extremely small – and it has not increased over the last ten years either. This is partly due to the fact that we too, the supporters of the civil society organisations, have maybe put too much emphasis on training and other measures and not enough on the function of the organisations as political pressure groups. If topics involving civil society organisations are come up in political discussion at all, then usually in response to pressure by the respective foreign countries that provide the funds.

What is the relationship between civil society and the Afghan government?

Hantke: You can't generalise in this area. While there are of course civil society organisations that collaborate with the government, such as those headed by former politicians, there are also highly critical organisations; it is all in all a huge potpourri. Let me say it this way: In this huge array of some two and a half to three thousand organisations in existence here in Afghanistan, you will find everything from civil society organisations oriented towards the Taliban to organisations with a very modern outlook.

The Afghanistan activities, which we keep hearing about in this context: Can you explain what this phrase signifies and who is involved?

Hantke: As political foundations collaborating with the German Federal Foreign Office and the German embassy, we have enabled and initiated a situation, where a joint process involving the civil society organisations is to take place with the aim of them being able to present a unified and joint position in Bonn. But we want to leave it to the Afghans themselves. We help where we can, we give advice where we can and where it is asked for, but it is supposed to be an Afghan-led process. For this reason we have asked the Human Rights Commission to act as facilitator. Its deputy chairman, Fahim Hakim, has done an excellent job in my opinion. I congratulated him once more after the conference,

because it had been a really difficult process. This is because the splintering of the civil society organisations is very extensive and it is therefore all the more impressive that it was possible to complete a process where the majority of these organisations came to an agreement.

We know that Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung cooperates with civil society organisations. Can you give us a few concrete examples?

Hantke: Well, we cooperate with various civil society organisations, with the trades unions amongst others. But we avoid merely making funds or other means available to these organisations and then letting them get on with it; instead, we want to develop things with them. We work with them to develop curricula, we develop entire lines with them and share in the responsibility, in financial matters as well. In particular, we want to support our partner organisations in becoming politically active so as to exert greater influence on political developments than has been the case to date. We focus particularly on topics of social policy and economic policy. We have just realised a large conference on economic policy in conjunction with civil society organisations, which several members of the government took part in. We have the impression that we can thereby help the involved organisations to gain greater political influence.

You have been in Kabul since the beginning of the year already and you work locally. How do you feel when you think of your work in Afghanistan?

Hantke: It's complex. On the one hand it's great fun. We work a lot with young people, who are very enthusiastic, even if they lack some prerequisites that are a matter of course to us. It's fun, that is one feeling. It's a great deal of work, that is the other feeling. But you enjoy doing the work. When you concentrate on your work, you blank out the entire surroundings. That's what the Afghans do too. I think that if you ponder every day on what the political and security situation here is you will probably become despondent. So you blank it out, you concentrate on what you want to do. And there are plenty of pleasant experiences in our collaboration with partners and young people, which leave you with a very good feeling in the end.

I'm sorry that I am only staying for one year. I definitely feel like I should stay longer, because I have only just familiarised myself fully with the work.