Battleground Kankur: Afghan students' difficult way into higher education

Author: Obaid Ali

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For some hundred thousand Afghan high school graduates, the university entry tests, known as kankur, have started. The first to sit the exam, from December onwards, were students in more-remote provinces, for example Badghis, Bamyan, Daikundi, Nuristan, Wardak, Logar and Sar-e Pul. Pictures of rows of students sitting on city squares or mosques taking the exam surfaced in the media. But despite all eagerness, problems like crowded exam sites, interventions of by local powerbrokers, organisers’ mismanagement and the general insecurity made the exam-taking – again – a major challenge for the students and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). AAN’s Obaid Ali provides insights into the workings of this exam and describes the difficulties students face to get into institutes of higher education.

It is hard to win a place to study in an Afghan state-run university when more than 300,000 twelfth-graders are applying for only 55,000 slots. The eye of the needle all students must pass through is the so-called kankur exam (from the French word concours), the university entry test. It is held every year between December and the end of February, province by province. But this
exam is for different reasons a contested one: organisational shortcomings and political interferences trigger protests and demonstrations every year (see also previous AAN reporting).

The test contains 160 questions about subjects taught at high school in grades nine to twelve. The answers are by multiple choice: the students have two hours and 30 minutes to tick boxes. Correct answers are worth one to three points. The maximum number of points is 332, but more important is the minimum number of points needed to qualify for a university slot. Applicants can choose five courses of study they favor, and each course requires a certain score. A computer program assesses the answer sheets and assigns students to faculties. In general, faculties like medical science, engineering, law, political science and economy are most popular and require higher scores to get in. However, if a student does not score high enough for any of his or her chosen faculties, he or she is dropped altogether and is not assigned any faculty, a result called be-natija (without result).

But the struggle to get into university actually starts long before the kankur itself, as many twelfth-graders are not sufficiently equipped to answer kankur questions properly. This is mainly due to continuing insufficient instruction in high schools and especially the lack of qualified teachers (particularly in the sciences; see here and here). This is why those who can afford it invest in private kankur preparation courses.

The number of such courses has starkly increased across the country over the past years. In Kabul alone, hundreds are offered, with tens of thousands of students from grade eleven onwards registered. They are run by – more or less – qualified teachers and university students. A student ideally starts his course two years ahead of the kankur exam. In the first year, he or she attends the “basics course” (asasat, in Dari), including lessons on mathematics, chemistry, biology, history, geography and physics. In the second year, previous kankur questionnaires are reviewed, introducing students to the methodology of the test and to tactics on how to answer the questions in the allocated time.

More challenges: cost, competition, scores

But there are more challenges to overcome to sit and pass the exam. As the kankur mainly takes place in the capital of a province, students from rural areas are often at a disadvantage. They have to raise money for the journey as well as for food and accommodation, while costs for the latter often rise significantly in cities during kankur times. In Ghazni province, for example, as this author has learned, the price for one night’s accommodation tripled this year. Speaking to AAN, Reza Haidari, a kankur applicant from rural Ghazni said it was hard to “find a warm bed” in Ghazni city during exam times. He himself paid 400 afghanis (eight dollars) per night for a hotel room shared with ten other students.

The sheer number of applicants also increases the competition for higher education. Every year, some ten thousand students more than in the previous year apply for slots in state-run universities. Figures for the ‘early years’ are, as usual, a little bit of a muddle, but according to a media report, 71,000 students sat the kankur in 2007 and 89,000 took it in 2008. In 2011,
according to this World Bank report (p 19), approximately 117,000 young Afghans took the exam, with figures jumping to 175,000 in 2013 and 250,000 in 2014 (see for sources also this previous AAN report).

For the test in 2015, another 50,000 high school graduates – altogether now 300,000 – applied to sit the kankur test. And, as in previous years, in an attempt to limit the number of applicants given the shortage of space at the universities, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) has again increased the score needed for passing the exam. In 2012, for example, a student had to get 150 out of 332 total points to win a university slot. In 2013, it was 157 and in 2014, this increased further to 167 points. Simultaneously, the ministry has, in previous years, tried to increase the number of university places by some thousand every year. However, in 2015 the ministry decided that it couldn’t be helped: there was just no more space – and not enough money, according to spokesman Abdul Azim Nurbakhsh - to accommodate more students. For the first time in years, there will be no additional slots, with the overall number remaining at 55,000.

Strongmen’s interferences

But even if a student managed to answer a sufficient portion of the 160 questions well enough to ensure his or her slot in a university, the concern remains whether he or she will study. Seats may still be allocated to protégées of local powerbrokers who, before or after the kankur, interfere in its outcome in order to push their own candidates. The patience with this practice is decreasing within the MoHE, with officials bitterly lamenting about provincial leaders storming their offices every year around kankur time. But consequences all too often affect all students and not only those who would have benefitted from unfair attempts to influence the allocation of university places. In this year’s kankur in Wardak, the MoHE's exam committee for example cancelled 280 students’ results. The MoHE claimed that this was to neutralize the intervention of local strongmen who allegedly had stayed in the exam hall, helping some of the 280 to cheat. When members of the ministry delegation wanted to stop them, they were beaten (see MoHE statement here). Speaking to AAN, Anwar Shams, the director of the MoHE kankur preparation committee, said that local powerbroker interference was a major challenge. Also in Ghazni and Kapisa provinces, he said, strongmen had beaten up and threatened the MoHE delegates.

Incidents like these must be understood as exhibitions of power. In many poor, post-conflict countries, studying brings pride to families and is a potential means for future success and wealth. Securing a place in university for someone in their community helps increase a local strongman’s standing. It also expands his base of supporters for the future – quite important in a society where 67.3 per cent of people are under the age of 25 (see National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011–2012, page 10). And then, of course, some of these local strongmen could be taking bribes from applicants to help them in the kankur.

Events at this year’s Ghazni kankur illustrated what happens when local interests clash. The delegation dispatched to hold the exam, a four-day event for 12,000 graduates that started on 2 December, reported that bodyguards of Ghazni’s provincial council speaker had beaten and
threatened with death three delegation members when they wanted to collect the questionnaires at the end of the exam. The bodyguards wanted the delegation to extend the kankur time and refused to leave the hall. Provincial council speaker Gholam Hussain Changiz rejected the accusations. When speaking to AAN, he insisted the MoHE delegation’s report aimed at “discrediting the kankur in Ghazni.” He himself claimed the exam had not been properly organized, that the provincial governor had appointed observers and that he had chosen only “ordinary people” (the MoHE’s rules demand qualified personnel, ie university teachers). Also, Changiz claimed that the applicants were not given the full two and a half hours to complete the test.

Incidents like these seem hard to stop. Already back in November, in an attempt to prevent such interference by local authorities, the MoHE had dispatched a delegation seeking the support of Dr Abdullah Abdullah, then the new president’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO). According to Anwar Shams, head of the kankur preparation committee, the CEO had promised to request local governmental officials (governors, heads of provincial education departments, provincial polices chiefs and other governmental officials) to refrain from interfering. As the Ghazni events show, however, so far, this has had little effect. And then, there are of course those powerbrokers outside of the state apparatus, who are even harder to discipline.

The ministry’s (mis)management

Apart from keeping the local powerbrokers at bay, the actual task of the MoHE’s kankur delegations to provinces is to properly handle the technical and organisational challenges. This, however, also all too often goes sideways. Sometimes, there are not enough questionnaires for all students; at other times, Pashto questionnaires are distributed to Dari speakers and the other way around; students do not learn on time when and where their kankur will take place; and exam halls are not always set up in a way that prevents cheating. In this year’s kankur exam in Badghis province, where 700 students participated, the exam was conducted in November, before the final school exams were over. Apparently, the MoHE had intended to administer kankurs in remote provinces as quickly as possible, before the first snow. But this collided with schools’ final exams.

Sayed Ziauddin Waseqi, the head of the education department in Badghis, told AAN that this had caused difficulties for the twelfth-graders. Many stopped attending their regular school classes and took kankur preparation courses instead. According to Waseqi, some students have passed their kankur exams, but not their twelfth-grade final school exam – a prerequisite for being admitted to the kankur.

Among the critics of the methods of the MoHE are university lecturers. Professor Saifuddin Saihun, a Kabul university lecturer, for example, told AAN that the kankur preparation department was not equipped to deal with the procedure that required knowledge of a computerised system. (1) He also believes that the much-needed transparency could only be achieved by holding the kankurs in Kabul, where the MoHE could prevent political interventions and could better monitor the exams. Taj Muhammad Akbari, the head of the Afghanistan
University Lecturers’ Union, complained in a press conference in December 2014 that, because those standards were not heeded, too many applicants got into public universities through rawabet (relations) (see media reporting here and here).

The head of the kankur preparation committee, Shams, admits there are problems. He believes, however, that the shortage of funds and equipment for his department contributes to the difficulty of preparing a proper kankur. His committee got from the Ministry of Finance, he says, “only 110 million afghanis” (circa 1.9 million dollars), while he had initially asked for 128 million afghanis (2.2 million dollars) for this year’s kankur. (This is, however, already an increase: in 2014, the department received only 70 million afghanis.) Speaking to AAN, Shams said that to “prepare for example one batch of 12,000 questionnaires for a certain province, my department has to have 21 staff.” But his department had only ten people to do the job. Also, the questionnaire preparers are supposed to be ‘quarantined’ – locked in without phones to limit the possibility of questionnaires becoming public before the exam and of answers being sold. This can take four to seven days, from the time that the questionnaires are printed until the exam takes place. But “we don’t have enough space for 21 people to stay overnight – or over several nights, for that matter,” said the director.

Another much-criticised issue is the lack of professionals for monitoring the kankur exams. According to the rules, this should be handled by university teachers. But most, said Anwar Shams, “are not interested in going to provinces in order to help with the kankurs, due to the insecurity and small per diems.” His department can only offer 1000 afghanis per day, he says, and adds sarcastically: “If the per diem would be increased to 100 dollars, everyone would take part.”

A sense of fair play and national responsibility

The first reports from the provinces that already have hosted the kankurs this year – many of them rather remote – are obviously not the end of the story. Larger and more-central provinces are about to have their exams, with the potential for ‘louder’ reactions. In the past, every year saw large demonstrations by students who felt cheated out of their chances, either by local powerbrokers favouring other students or by the ministry’s perceived inability to organise the kankur properly and fairly for everyone (complaints included ethnic biases as well as rural-urban biases; see previous AAN reporting here and here). No demonstration has taken place yet, though. The Ministry of Higher Education has also tried to improve things: in November 2013, it established a Kankur Support Commission (kumission-e hemayawi-ye kankur) to ensure its transparency and fairness. Its 300 members included universities’ directors and members of the universities' lecturers union. One year later, though, this commission has already been replaced again by a new commission, this time consisting of representatives from the ministries of interior, defense, education, higher education, telecommunication, information and culture, transport, also of the IDLG and the NDS. As this commission has only been set up in November, there is no saying how effective it will be. As above described incidents in the provinces show, there is indeed still room for improvement.
But change cannot come from the government side only. It must also come from both provincial authorities and local powerbrokers who are not shying away from cheating and from using physical force to secure their protégées’ futures. Only when they stop pressuring and threatening officials will these have a chance to do their work.

It will be interesting to see if the new president – who has a declared interest in higher education and is a former chancellor of Kabul university – will be able set a new tone: a tone of fair play and national responsibility by all stakeholders. Creating the best future work force possible to help pull the country out of its political and economic quagmire should be the goal now – especially of the kankur.

(1) To register the students for the kankur, first the education departments of 34 provinces provide lists of twelfth-graders to the MoHE. Then the kankur preparation department hands the kankur application forms to the provincial education departments, which distribute them to the students to be filled in. The filled forms are returned to the MoHE, where the kankur preparation department scans them and enters the data in the computerised system. The department then produces ID cards with serial numbers for all applicants. The provincial education departments collect the ID cards and distribute them to the students. Based on the details collected from 34 provinces, the computerised system prepares questionnaires from a ‘question bank’ in both Pashto and Dari. On kankur day, to ensure the applicant’s identity, he or she must write his or her name and ID serial number on the answer sheet. If a student forgets to note his or her ID number, the computerised system won’t accept the sheet and the student is left “without results.”