



Afghan Public Opinion Amidst Rising Violence

-A WorldPublicOpinion.org Poll-

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INTRODUCTION

As 2006 draws to a close, observers of Afghanistan generally agree that conditions there are worsening. Security has deteriorated, making it harder to deliver economic assistance. The Taliban has stepped up its activities, demonstrating an ability to fight pitched battles with foreign military forces and copying some of the terrorist methods used by Iraqi insurgents. Increasing opium poppy cultivation has made it more difficult to carry out development projects and improve the economic well being of the Afghan people. Corruption on the part of central government officials is another obstacle that may hinder efforts by the government of President Hamid Karzai to extend its authority throughout the country.

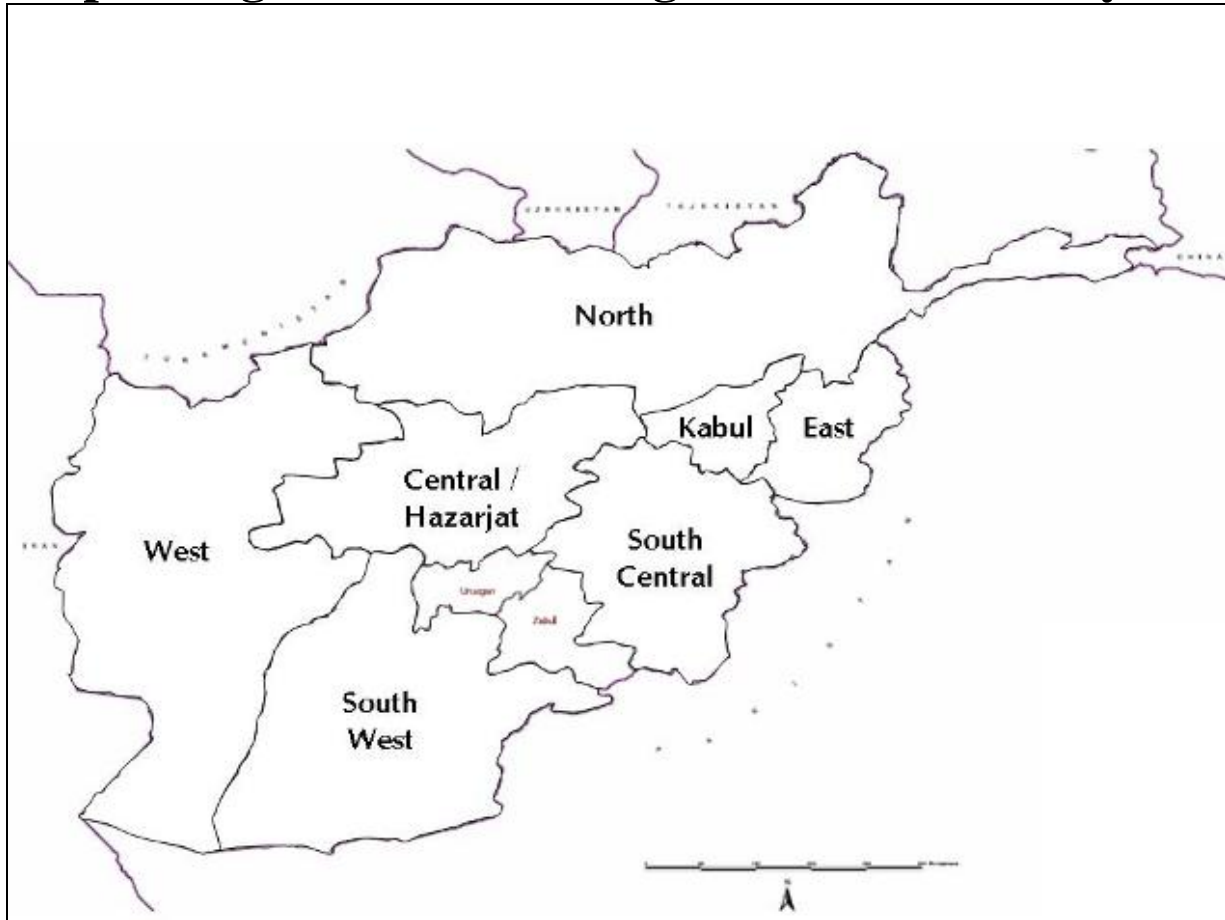
Observers are also concerned about the long-term loyalties of the people of Afghanistan. If the government, with the help of western countries, is not able over time to provide either security or economic well being, it may lose the support of the Afghan population.

Consequently, a debate is in progress over how the international community should help Afghanistan. Should military assistance have primacy? Or should economic aid be the priority? The Afghan people's reservoir of goodwill may evaporate if they do not see more improvement in their lives.

This survey puts these issues to Afghans themselves. Do they see progress being made? Or do they believe their country is headed toward another crisis? How do they feel about their government and about the foreign military forces that fight on its behalf? Do they believe more military help is key to their future? Or would they prefer a greater emphasis on aid designed to rebuild their war-torn country?

To answer these questions, the Program on International Policy Attitudes conducted a poll, fielded by ACSOR/D3 Systems, Inc., that interviewed 2,089 Afghan adults over November 13-24, 2006 using a nationwide probability sample. Interviews were conducted in 32 of 34 provinces in Afghanistan; two provinces, Zabul and Uruzghan representing about 2.3 percent of the Afghan population, were excluded for security reasons. The poll has a sampling error of +/- 3.5 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

Map of Afghanistan with Regions Used for Analysis



Provinces Contained in Each Region

Kabul	East	South Central	South West	West	North	Central / Hazarjat
Kabul	Kunar	Ghazni	Helmand	Badghis	Badakhshan	Bamiyan
Kapisa	Laghman	Khost	Kandahar	Farah	Baghlan	Dehkondi
Parwan	Ningarhar	Logar		Herat	Balkh	Ghor
Panjshir	Nooristan	Paktia		Nimroz	Faryab	
		Paktika			Juzjan	
		Wardak			Kunduz	
					Samangan	
					Sar-I-Pul	
					Takhar	

Key findings are:

1. Country’s Direction, Afghan Government and Foreign Military Presence

Majorities of Afghans see their country as going in the right direction and are positive toward the central government, President Karzai, NATO forces, and the United States. But all of these majorities are declining 4

2. Dissatisfaction with Reconstruction

A majority of Afghans are critical of the progress made in reconstructing roads, schools, hospitals and water supplies and they put a higher priority on economic over military assistance. The more frustrated Afghans feel about the pace of reconstruction, the more likely they are to feel that their country is headed in the wrong direction and to express unfavorable opinions about the foreign military presence and the United States. Perceptions of corruption are also related to lower support for the central government. International aid agencies, however, get good marks for their work.. 5

3. The Taliban

The vast majority of Afghans—now nine in ten—view the Taliban negatively. They also think that overthrowing the Taliban was good for their country. Both the central government and local leaders are much more widely seen as having power and respect than the Taliban. While opinions are mixed on whether the Taliban has recently gained or lost ground, four out of five Afghans think it unlikely that the Taliban will actually return to power. Despite increased Taliban activity, most Afghans continue to express fairly positive views of security in their area. This may be due to the confidence that Taliban forces will not prevail. Afghans may also have a high tolerance for insecurity given the instability that they have faced in recent decades. 7

4. Role of Pakistan

A large and growing majority views Pakistan negatively and thinks Pakistan’s government is permitting Taliban operations on its soil. 10

5. Efforts to Control Opium Production

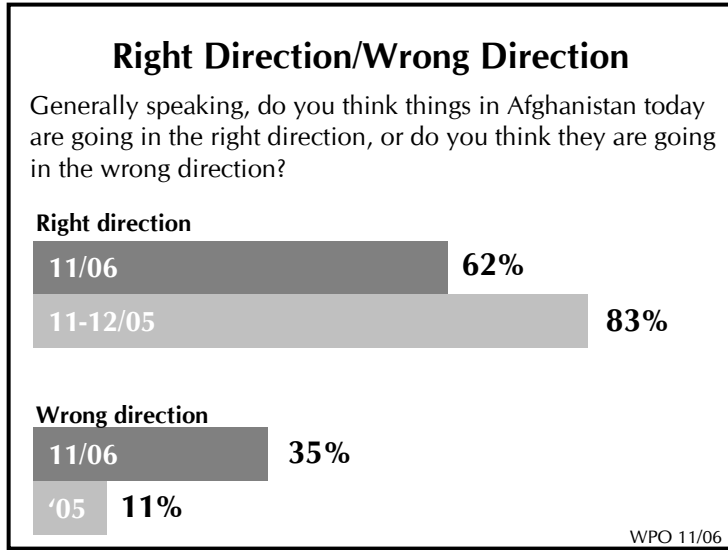
A majority of Afghans approve of international forces’ efforts to control opium poppy production. However, this majority is declining. In some regions, half now disapprove of such efforts..... 11

FINDINGS

1. Country’s Direction, Afghan Government and Foreign Military Presence

Majorities of Afghans see their country as going in the right direction and are positive toward the central government, President Karzai, NATO forces, and the United States. But all of these majorities are declining.

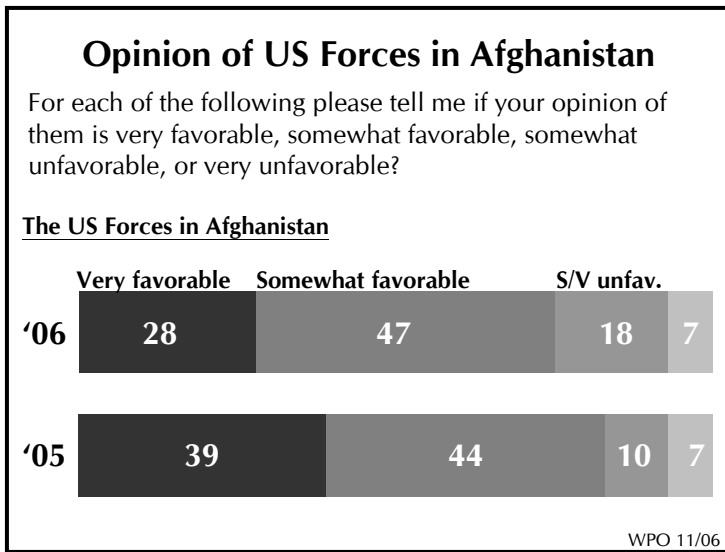
A substantial, but declining, majority of Afghans is positive about their country’s direction. Sixty-two percent said that Afghanistan was going in the right direction, while 35 percent said it was going in the wrong direction. This majority view, however, has declined sharply over the last twelve months. The sense that “things in Afghanistan today are going in the right direction” dropped sharply, falling 21 points (83% to 62%). The belief that Afghanistan is going in the wrong direction rose 24 points (11% to 35%). These trends are consistent with an ABC/BBC poll conducted in October, which found that 55 percent said Afghanistan was going in the right direction (down from 77 percent from twelve months before)



Asked to assess the central government, 51 percent said they saw it as very effective. However, this is down from 55 percent in 2005. Similarly, an October poll by ABC/BBC asked about “the present government”—perhaps implying an evaluation of current members of the president’s cabinet—which found that 64 percent considered their work excellent or good, down from 80 percent the year before.

Afghans’ views of President Karzai were also quite favorable, with 55 percent giving him a very favorable rating. However, this view of the president has dropped 13 points (68% to 55%). These trends are consistent with the ABC/BBC poll, in which 68 percent rated Karzai’s performance as “excellent” or “good,” down from 83 percent a year before.

Afghans rated US military forces positively overall, but the proportion with “very favorable” opinions dropped 11 points (39% to 28%) from last year. The percentage with “somewhat favorable” opinions has remained steady (47%). Although attitudes



toward the United States itself were even warmer than attitudes toward US troops, Afghans’ positive opinion of the United States has declined in intensity. The proportion saying they have a “very favorable” view of the United States has dropped 10 points (40% to 30%; “somewhat favorable,” 51%).

Ratings of the United States’ performance in Afghanistan have been more lukewarm. In October, the ABC/BBC poll asked: “How would you rate the work of the US in Afghanistan?” The response to this question was more critical, with 57 percent calling the United States’ work excellent (12%) or good (45%), while 42 percent saw it as fair (27%) or poor (15%).

Attitudes toward the international forces in Afghanistan are quite positive, but less so than in 2005. The proportion of Afghans calling NATO troops “very effective” has declined 14 points, from 46 percent to 32 percent, while those calling them “somewhat effective” has grown from 36 to 45 percent. The percentage labeling them “not very effective” has risen from 10 to 16 percent (not effective at all, 6%). This decreasing sense of effectiveness comes despite widespread support for the troops’ presence. In October, an ABC/BBC poll of Afghans found that 78 percent expressed support for “the presence” of NATO forces “in Afghanistan today,” and the same percentage supported the presence of US forces.

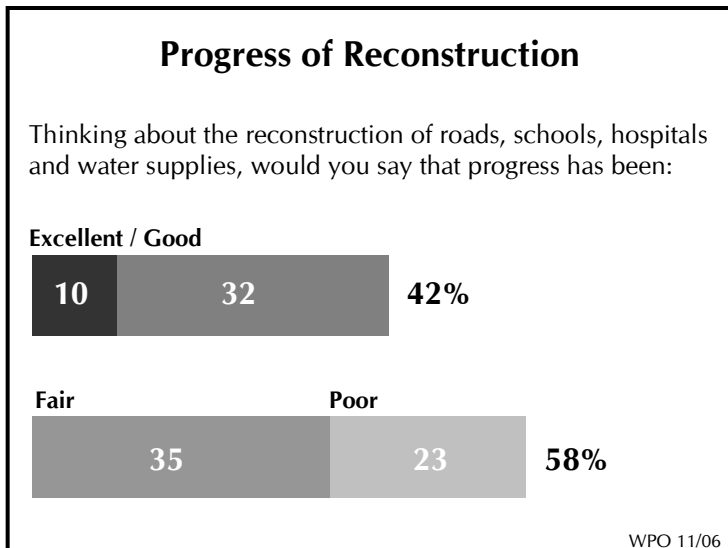
Afghans’ views of local leaders, however, were not subject to this downward trend. When asked how effective they thought their local leaders were, 73 percent of Afghans called them either “somewhat effective” (46%) or “very effective” (27%). Only twenty-seven percent said local leaders were not very (22%) or not at all (5%) effective. This was an increase over last year, when 64 percent viewed local leaders as somewhat or very effective.

2. Dissatisfaction with Reconstruction

A majority of Afghans are critical of the progress made in reconstructing roads, schools, hospitals and water supplies and they put a higher priority on economic over military assistance. The more frustrated Afghans feel about the pace of reconstruction, the more likely they are to feel that their country is headed in the wrong direction and to express unfavorable opinions about the foreign military presence and the United States. Perceptions of corruption are also related to lower support for the central government. International aid agencies, however, get good marks for their work.

A majority of Afghans express dissatisfaction with efforts to rebuild basic infrastructure and services. Nearly six in ten Afghans (58%) said only fair (35%) or poor (23%) progress had been made in the reconstruction of roads, schools, hospitals and water supplies. Only 42 percent considered the progress made to be excellent (10%) or good (32%).

Those who felt the pace of reconstruction was unsatisfactory also expressed less positive views about their country’s direction and



about the presence of foreign troops. Among those who said progress had been poor, only 53 percent said Afghanistan was headed in the right direction, compared to 80 percent of those who called the progress excellent. Those unhappy with reconstruction also were less likely to have a favorable opinion of the U.S. military or to believe that NATO forces were effective. Only 62 percent of those who thought progress on reconstruction was poor said their view of U.S. troops was favorable, compared to 92 percent of those who said such progress had been excellent. And only 66 percent of those who thought progress was poor called NATO forces effective, compared to 91 percent of those who said progress had been excellent.

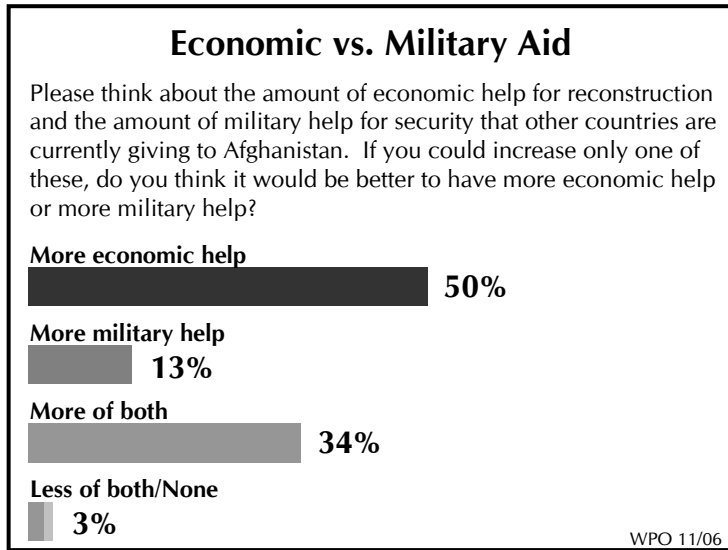
Another source of frustration in Afghanistan is government corruption. About one in four Afghans (24%) said they or someone in their family had been “personally affected by an act of corruption by government officials” in the past year. Those in southwestern and western Afghanistan (38% in both) were most likely to say they had personally experienced corruption. Those in the central area around Kabul (14%) and in northern Afghanistan (17%) were the least likely.

Those directly affected by official corruption were less likely than other Afghans to express satisfaction with their country’s direction. Only half of those who reported such experiences (51%) said they thought Afghanistan was on the right path compared to a majority (65%) of those who said they had not had to deal with corrupt officials. Those who had experienced corruption were also less likely to have a very favorable opinion of President Hamid Karzai (42%) than those with no such experience (58%). And they were less likely to believe that the central Afghan government was very effective (36% vs. 55%).

Higher Priority Placed on Economic over Military Assistance

Afghans show a greater interest in economic than in military assistance. When asked whether they believed it would be better to have more economic or more military help, 50 percent chose more economic help compared to 13 percent who favored more military aid. About a third (34%) would like more of both kinds of aid.

In southwestern Afghanistan, the region most affected by the Taliban’s military resurgence, military aid receives a higher priority than among respondents in the rest of the country. Most preferred both kinds of aid (47%) or more military aid (19%). Only a third of respondents in this region (31%) favored more economic help alone.



Views of International Agencies

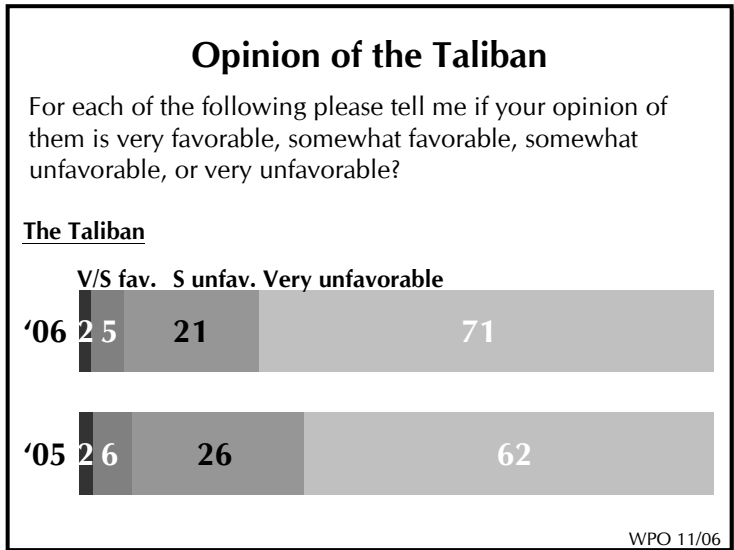
In both 2005 and 2006, Afghans were asked about the effectiveness of “international agencies providing aid for reconstruction.” In the current study, 84 percent said such agencies were very (41%) or somewhat (43%) effective, slightly higher than in 2005. Only 16 percent saw them as not very (13%) or not at all (3%) effective.

Answers to this question varied little by region despite the fact that some regions, where aid personnel have had to be withdrawn for security reasons, receive less aid than others. It seems that many Afghans take security issues into account when they think about the performance of international agencies' and NGOs.

3. The Taliban

The vast majority of Afghans—now nine in ten—view the Taliban negatively. They also think that overthrowing the Taliban was good for their country. Both the central government and local leaders are much more widely seen as having power and respect than the Taliban. While opinions are mixed on whether the Taliban has recently gained or lost ground, four out of five Afghans think it unlikely that the Taliban will actually return to power. Despite increased Taliban activity, most Afghans continue to express fairly positive views of security in their area. This may be due to the confidence that Taliban forces will not prevail. Afghans may also have a high tolerance for insecurity given the instability that they have faced in recent decades.

Over the past year, the Taliban has become more active in Afghanistan, launching attacks on NATO forces and on civilians seen as cooperating with the central government. Despite this resurgence, Afghan opinion about the Taliban, already highly negative in late 2005, has grown even more critical. Ninety-two percent of the Afghan people said their opinion of the Taliban was unfavorable, up four points from 88 percent in 2005. The numbers expressing a “very unfavorable” view increased the most, rising 9 points from 62 percent to 71 percent. Only 7 percent expressed somewhat (5%) or very favorable (2%) views of the Taliban.



The Taliban is slightly more popular in Afghanistan’s southern and eastern provinces along the Pakistan border, where insurgent activity has increased over the past year. In southwestern Afghanistan, which includes the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, 12 percent of Afghans gave the Taliban favorable ratings. Kandahar was a Taliban stronghold until the militants were expelled by US and Afghan forces in December 2001. Other provinces in south central Afghanistan and in eastern Afghanistan had similar levels of favorability (15% in each). However, the Taliban’s military resurgence did not increase its popularity in these regions compared to 2005.

Osama Bin Laden, who was associated with and supported the Taliban when it was in power, is also extremely unpopular in Afghanistan: 94 percent of Afghans had an unfavorable opinion of him. This included 80 percent who viewed Bin Laden very unfavorably, up slightly from 75 percent in 2005.

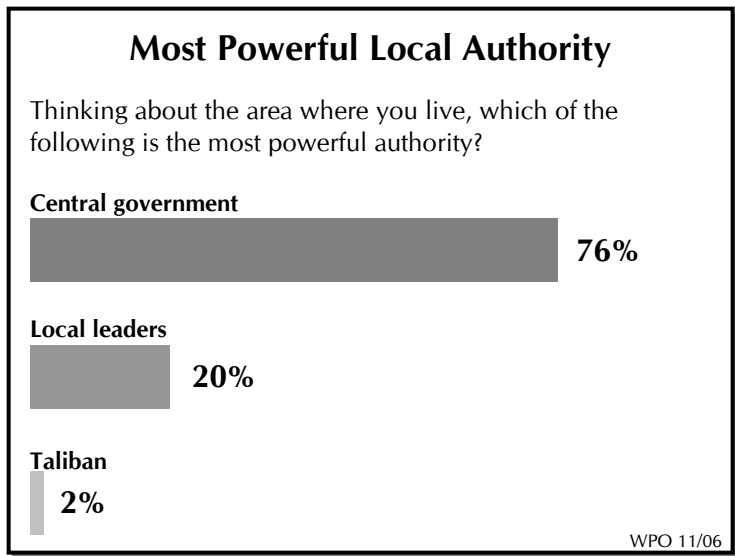
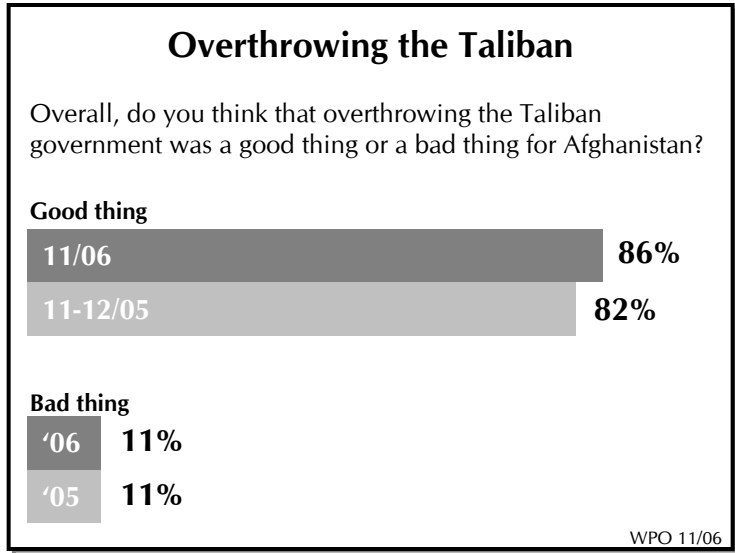
A great majority of Afghans (86%) continued to think that overthrowing the Taliban government was good for their country. This positive assessment of the Taliban's overthrow has increased slightly, up four points from 82 percent in 2005.

One region however, stood apart. In Southwestern Afghanistan, comprising the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand (where the Taliban has been active), there was a relatively modest majority (55%) saying getting rid of the Taliban was beneficial, while 43 percent viewed it as a bad thing. More significantly, the proportion saying that it was a bad thing that the Taliban was overthrown was up 30 points from 13 percent in 2005.

Insurgencies aspire to increase their authority and respect in regions where they are active. This poll suggests the Taliban have been unable to do so in Afghanistan. Only two percent of Afghans felt that the Taliban was the "most powerful authority" in the area where they lived. Seventy-six percent said the central government was the most powerful authority and 20 percent said local leaders were the most powerful. Similarly, only three percent of Afghans said that the Taliban was the "most respected authority". Far more called the central government (62%) or local leaders (31%) the most respected authorities in their area.

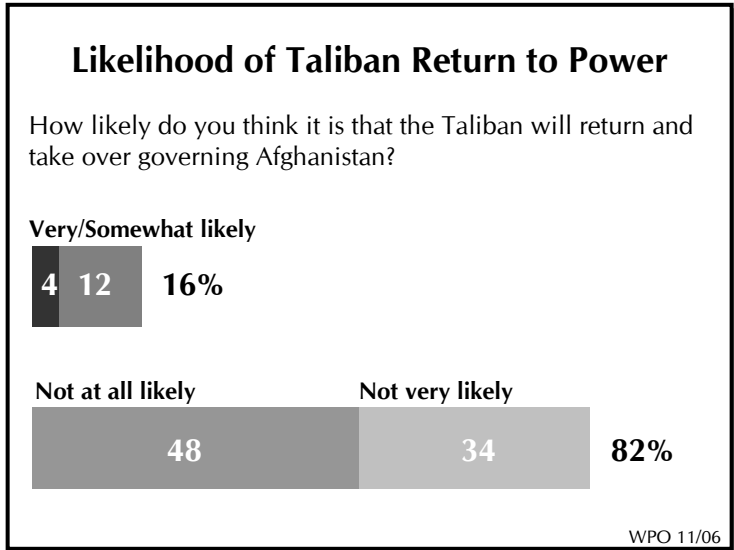
One regional difference is noteworthy: In the southwest, 10 percent of respondents labeled the Taliban the most powerful authority and 12 percent called it the most respected. In none of the other five regions did more than four percent view the Taliban as the most powerful or most respected authority. The position of the Taliban in southwestern Afghanistan appears to be somewhat stronger than in other Afghan regions. Even here, however, only a small minority considered them the most important local authority.

The people of Afghanistan are somewhat divided about whether over the past year "the Taliban has gained ground or lost ground" in its conflict with the central government, including NATO forces, or if there had been no change. One third (33%) of respondents felt that the Taliban had gained ground while 37 percent felt that the Taliban had lost ground. Twenty-eight percent said there had been no real change. Respondents in western Afghanistan were more likely (44%) to see the Taliban as



having gained ground than those in the north (22%). In the southwest, where much of the worst fighting has taken place in recent months, about 38 percent believed the Taliban had gained ground, 37 percent believed it had lost ground, and 26 percent said there had been no real change.

Only a small minority of Afghans thought that the Taliban was likely to “return and take over governing Afghanistan.” Only 16 percent considered this likely, including 4 percent who said it was very likely and 12 percent who said it was somewhat likely. Eighty-two percent thought a Taliban takeover was unlikely, including 48 percent who said it was not at all likely and 34 who considered it not very likely. This held true across each of the seven regions of Afghanistan: large majorities (69% to 89%) said that a Taliban takeover was unlikely. Somewhat larger percentages thought



a Taliban takeover was possible in the southwestern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand (25%) and in the western provinces of Herat, Badghis, Farah, and Nimroz (31%). But even in these regions a more than a 2-to-1 majority felt it was unlikely.

Perceptions of Security

Despite the growing violence of Taliban forces, a majority of Afghans are positive about security in their own area. Fifty-five percent described the security in their area as “good” and 29 percent even described it as “excellent.” This is quite similar to the August 2006 Asia Foundation poll, which found that 49 percent of Afghans said security in their area was good and 17 percent said it was excellent.

This raises the question of why Afghans express these positive views, given the widely reported instability in their country. First, as noted above, most Afghans express confidence that the Taliban will not ultimately succeed. Second, it should be remembered that people’s views about their personal security are influenced by their baseline of expectations. Considering the instability that Afghans have faced over the last decades, current conditions may indeed look relatively positive. In the ABC/BBC poll, 58 percent saw “security from crime and violence” as better than it was before the fall of the Taliban, while in the same poll, in response to an open-ended question, more respondents (33%) named security and violence the “biggest problem facing Afghanistan as a whole” than any other problem.

Furthermore, in the August 2006 Asia Foundation poll, although two out of three gave good reports about their security, 40 percent said that often or sometimes they “fear for [their] own personal safety or security or for that of [their] family” and one out of eight (13%) said that in the last year they or a family member had “been a victim of physical aggression or of some criminal act in the home or community.” Thus, what an Afghan considers a good level of security may be quite different from what someone living in a developed democracy might consider good security.

Another curious finding is that Afghans’ views of their security appear to have gone up relative to 2005 when 49 percent said that their security was good and 21 percent said it was excellent. Also, when asked how their security had changed over the last twelve months, 65 percent said it was “somewhat better” (39%) or “much better” (26%).

How could this happen when reports from Afghanistan indicate that the Taliban have stepped up their attacks? As mentioned, despite current violence, most Afghans say that the security in their area is good and better than it was in the past. Even if there is little reason to believe that their security has actually improved, the simple passage of time during which they have experienced a relatively low level of violent conflict in the area where they live may give Afghans a mildly heightened sense of security.

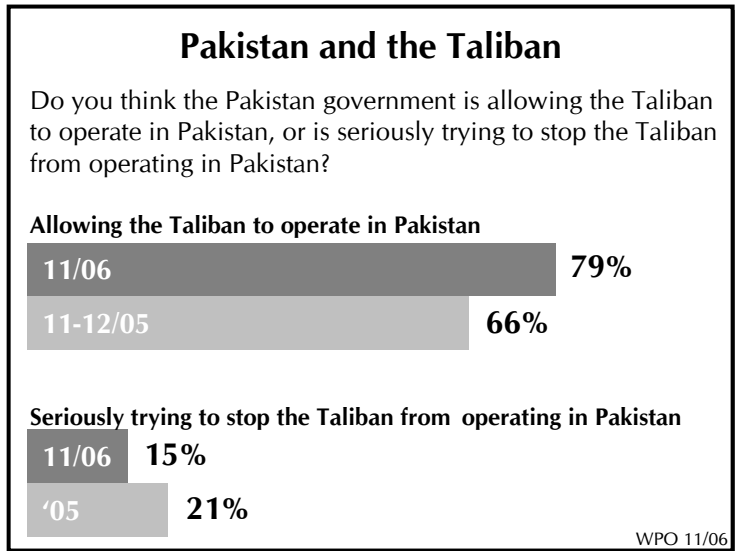
However, when violence reaches a certain level it does appear to reach a threshold at which Afghans’ feeling of security erodes. In southwestern Afghanistan, including the provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, where Taliban activity has risen in the last year, the numbers saying security was only “fair” or “poor” went up over the past year from 24 percent to 39 percent.

Looking at the country as a whole, however, it appears that the threat posed by the activity of the Taliban has not reached the threshold where most Afghans have started to grow more worried about their security.

4. Role of Pakistan

A large and growing majority views Pakistan negatively and thinks Pakistan’s government is permitting Taliban operations on its soil.

A large and growing majority of Afghans believe Pakistan has failed to take action against Taliban forces within its borders. Eight in ten Afghans (79%) said they thought the government of Pakistan was allowing the Taliban to operate in its territory. Only 15 percent said that Pakistan was “seriously trying” to stop Taliban fighters from operating there. This was up 13 points from last year, when two-thirds (66%) said that Pakistani officials were allowing the Taliban to operate while one-fifth (21%) said that they were trying to stop such activities. Majorities of seven in ten or more in all regions believed this, especially in the central Hazarjat region (95%) and western areas along the Pakistani border (91%).



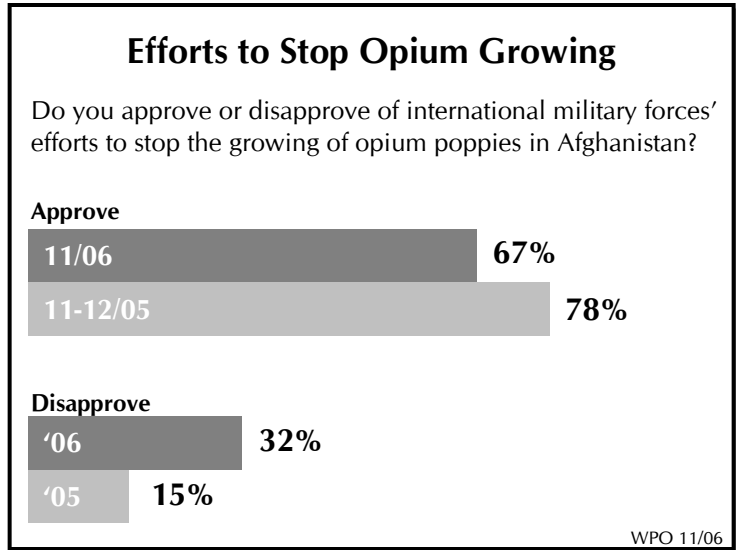
Most Afghans have a poor opinion of Pakistan and it has grown worse over the past year. Three-fourths of Afghans (75%) said that Pakistan is having a mainly negative influence in the world. Only 6 percent said its influence was positive and 15 percent chose neither. A year ago, less than two-thirds (63%) said Pakistan had a mainly negative international influence, while 13 percent said their neighbor had a positive influence and 17 percent chose neither.

5. Efforts to Control Opium Production

A majority of Afghans approve of international forces’ efforts to control opium poppy production. However, this majority is declining. In some regions, half now disapprove of such efforts.

A majority of Afghans support international programs to eradicate poppy cultivation, though their approval of such efforts varies by region. Two-thirds of Afghans overall (67%) said “international military forces’ efforts to stop the growing of opium poppies in Afghanistan” were good. But this represented a decline of 11 points from the 78 percent who approved of such efforts in December 2005.

Approval of poppy eradication was highest in the central Hazarjat region (89%), where it had risen 8 points since last year.



Support was lowest in southwestern Afghanistan (47%), where it has dropped 32 points since 2005. This dramatic drop in approval of eradication programs in southwestern Afghanistan has coincided with a huge increase in poppy cultivation in the region over the past year. The area under opium poppy cultivation increased by 59 percent throughout Afghanistan in 2005 and by 121 percent in the south, according to the Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006, published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics.

The southwestern province of Helmand province alone now accounts for 42 percent of Afghanistan’s opium poppy crop. Afghan insurgents have hindered poppy eradication efforts, both by forcing international agencies to withdraw from the region and by working to “encourage and even threaten farmers to cultivate opium poppy,” the UNODC report said.

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