

A New Lens on Pakistan

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By Steven Kull

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A recent poll of the Pakistani public reveals the distortions in the lens through which many Americans view the events in the Muslim world. This lens is based on a narrative of conflict: on one side there are those who are potential U.S. allies--western oriented, relatively secular, moderate; on the other side are those steeped in traditional Islam who hate and fear the "West", with sympathies for al Qaeda. As we see Pakistan engulfed in the flames of conflict many try to identify who is who, who is on our "team." Some assume it must be President Musharraf and his supporters.

A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 907 urban Pakistanis reveals that this image does not fit Pakistan. As if to create a paradox for the American mind, a large majority of Pakistanis wants to see a greater role for Islam and Shari'a (Islamic law) in Pakistani society-- but at the same time want more democracy, favoring liberalizing reforms and opposing al-Qaeda.

The poll, taken before the imposition of emergency rule, asked respondents to gauge the importance of living "in a country that is governed according to Islamic principles" on a 10-point scale. Sixty-one percent gave an answer of 10 (meaning "absolutely important"). The mean response was 9.0. Sixty percent want Shari'a (Islamic law) to play a larger role, "as compared to current Pakistan law."

At the same time, a large majority of Pakistanis want Pakistan to be more democratic. Asked to use the 10-point scale to measure the importance of living "in a country that is governed by representatives elected by the people," the mean response was 8.4. They say it is equally important to live in a country where "the decisions of the courts are independent from influence by political and military authorities."

In this Islamic state there is little support for extreme religious conservatism. Only a small minority (15%) says they want to see more "Talibanization of daily life." Three in five view the activities of al-Qaeda as a threat to Pakistan's vital interests. Perhaps most significant, two-thirds support a recent government plan to reform the madrassas, including requiring them to spend more time on subjects like math and science.

Interestingly, among the 60 percent who support a larger role for Shari'a, support for democracy and reforms of the madrassas are higher than average.

And don't think Musharraf supporters offer a significantly different picture. While their support for democracy is slightly higher and their support for a greater role for Islam slightly lower, a large majority of Musharraf supporters are fully in line with mainstream Pakistani society.

So is the Pakistani public divided about the U.S.? Apparently not. Overall about two-thirds (64%) do not trust the United States "to act responsibly in the world." Only 27 percent feel that the cooperation between Pakistan and the United States on security and military matters has benefited Pakistan. Most striking, 72 percent believe the U.S. military presence in Asia is a critical threat to Pakistan.

But what about Musharraf supporters--don't they at least appreciate the billions the U.S. has sent to help prop him up? No, not according to this poll. Musharraf supporters are no less hostile and suspicious toward the U.S.

But this picture is not as grim as it may seem. Once we give up the idea that somewhere in the Pakistani public there is a constituency with which we can ally ourselves, it also becomes clear that the mainstream of Pakistani society is relatively moderate and shares many of our values about democracy as well as our concerns about militant Islam. This applies to supporters of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto as well as supporters of Musharraf.

While Pakistani society is presently racked by intense political conflict, it is not really about the themes that preoccupy the United States; it is primarily a conflict about power. Militant Islamic groups, such as al-Qaeda, do play a destabilizing role but they are not significant political players.

For the U.S. to form a positive relationship with the Pakistani public, though, will require countering some widely held perceptions. A large and growing majority of Pakistanis appear to perceive the United States as hostile to their desire for a more Islamic society. Indeed, 86 percent believe that it is a U.S. goal to "weaken and divide the Islamic world"-- up 13 points from February.

This suspicion is likely to persist as long as the United States is seen as approaching Pakistan and other Muslim countries by trying to find a secular, western-oriented ally as a bulwark against the Islamist tendencies of the masses. Once the United States is perceived as genuinely ready to enter into a constructive and respectful relationship with the mainstream of the Pakistani people, their suspicion may abate and they may come to be more supportive of cooperation on shared concerns.

Steven Kull is Director of WorldPublicOpinion.org, a project of the Program on International Policy Attitudes of the University of Maryland.