

Afghan Approval of the Karzai Government and Western Forces, Though Still Strong, Is Declining

December 14, 2006

A Majority Feels Frustrated with the Pace of Reconstruction

The Taliban Remain Very Unpopular, Despite Their Military Resurgence



A majority of Afghans express support for both the government of President Hamid Karzai and the presence of NATO forces. A new poll for WorldPublicOpinion.org finds that this support is declining, however, and that a majority of Afghans express frustration with the pace of reconstruction.

A U.S. soldier with Afghan children in the village of Gardiz, July 27, 2006. Photo by Sgt. Tim Sander/U.S. Army

Nonetheless, the Taliban remain overwhelmingly unpopular and few Afghans believe the religious militants are likely to regain power, despite their recent attacks on NATO forces.

Nine out of ten Afghans (90%) rate President Karzai positively. Attitudes toward the foreign troops in Afghanistan are also positive: 75 percent have a favorable view of US forces and 77 percent describe NATO forces as effective.

But the numbers expressing strong approval are declining. The percentage rating Karzai very favorably has dropped 13 points from 68 percent in [November/December 2005](#) to 55 percent in November 2006. Similarly, the percentage having a very favorable view of US troops has dropped 11 points and those saying NATO troops as "very effective" has fallen 14 points to 34 percent from 46 percent in 2005.

Stephen Weber of WorldPublicOpinion.org., said that this erosion of support for the Afghan government seems to reflect frustrations with the slow pace of reconstruction.

"The Taliban is far from winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people," he said, "but there are signs that the Karzai government and NATO are gradually losing them."

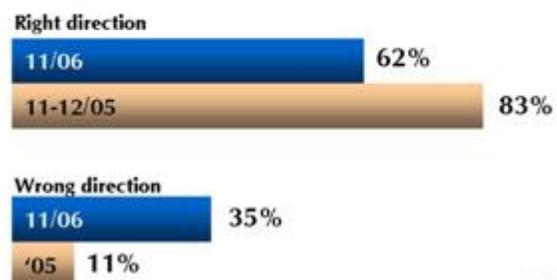
The nationwide survey included interviews with 2,097 Afghans and was carried out Nov. 13-24 by D3 Systems and the Afghan Center for Social and Opinion Research.

Country's Direction and Leadership

The proportion of the Afghan people who think Afghanistan is "going in the right direction" has dropped 21 points over the past year. In December 2005, four out of five Afghans (83%) said their country was headed in the right

Right Direction/Wrong Direction

Generally speaking, do you think things in Afghanistan today are going in the right direction, or do you think they are going in the wrong direction?



direction. In November 2006, only three out of five Afghans (62%) express the same optimism.

Asked to assess the central government, 51 percent say they see it as very effective. This is down from 55 percent in 2005. Similarly, an [October 2006 poll by ABC/BBC](#) asked about the "present government"—perhaps implying an evaluation of current cabinet members—and found that 64 percent considered their work excellent or good, down from 80 percent the year before.

Afghans' views of President Karzai are positive, with 55 percent giving him a "very favorable" rating. But this view has dropped 13 points, from 68 percent in 2005. These trends are also consistent with the ABC/BBC poll which found that 68 percent rated Karzai's performance as "excellent" or "good," down from 80 percent a year before.

Foreign Military Forces

Both the United States and the U.S. military have a generally positive image in Afghanistan, despite the deterioration over the past year. Three out of four Afghans (75%) rate U.S. Military forces positively overall, but the proportion with "very favorable" opinions has dropped 11 points (39% to 28%) from last year. The percentage with "somewhat favorable" opinions has remained steady at 47 percent.

Attitudes toward the United States are even warmer, with 81 percent regarding it favorably, including 30 percent who see it very favorably. Again, the "very favorable" rating has slipped, falling 10 points from 2005 to 2006 (40% to 30%). The somewhat favorable rating, however, has risen 10 points so that the overall percentage favorable to the United States has remained the same.

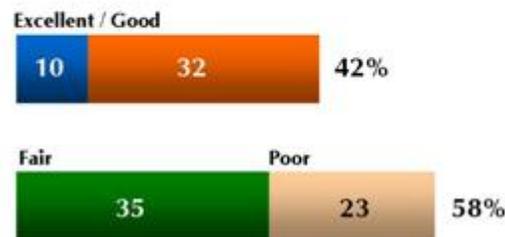
Respondents were asked also whether they regarded NATO forces in Afghanistan (known as the International Security Assistance Force or ISAF) as effective. Seventy-seven percent call them effective, including 32 percent who rate the ISAF as "very effective." But the proportion considering the ISAF "very effective" has fallen 14 points (46% to 32%) from last year while that of those rating the forces "somewhat effective" has risen 9 points (36% to 45%). Twenty-two percent think the NATO forces are not effective, up 7 points from 2005.

Frustration with Reconstruction

The Afghan public's declining optimism may reflect their dissatisfaction with the reconstruction of Afghanistan's roads, schools, hospitals and water supplies. A majority of Afghans (58%) think progress made toward rebuilding these basic services has been just fair (35%) or poor (23%). Only 42 percent say the effort so far has been excellent (10%) or good (32%).

Progress of Reconstruction

Thinking about the reconstruction of roads, schools, hospitals and water supplies, would you say that progress has been:



WFO 11/06

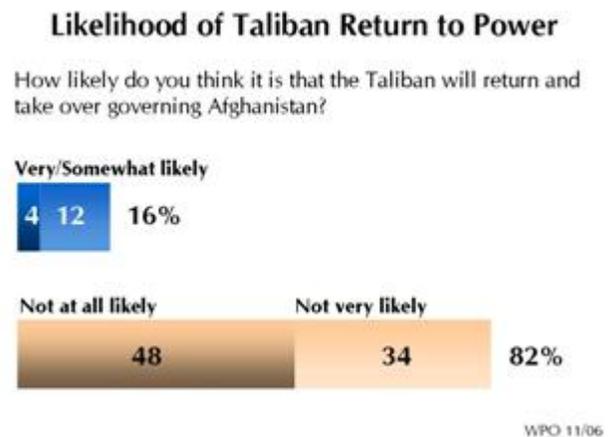
Those who feel the pace of reconstruction has been unsatisfactory also tend to express negative views about their country's direction and about the presence of foreign troops. Among those who say progress has been poor, only 54 percent say Afghanistan is headed in the right direction compared to 80 percent of those who call the progress so far excellent. And among those who say progress has been poor, only 62 percent have a favorable view of U.S. troops, compared to 92 percent of those who say progress has been excellent.

Another likely source of frustration in Afghanistan is government corruption. About one in four Afghans (24%) say they or someone in their family has been “personally affected by an act of corruption by government officials” over the past year. Those directly affected by official corruption are less likely than other Afghans to express satisfaction with their country’s direction. Only half of those with personal experience of corruption (51%) say Afghanistan is on the right path, compared to a majority (65%) of those who reported no such experiences.

Attitudes about the Taliban, Security

Despite these problems, there is no indication that the Taliban are winning popular support. A near unanimous 92 percent of Afghans view the Taliban unfavorably, a slight increase from 88 percent in 2005.

Only a third of Afghans (33%) think the Taliban have gained ground in the last year while 37 percent say they have lost ground and 28 percent believe there has been no real change in their position. And only 16 percent believe the Taliban are likely to return to power.” A large majority says such a Taliban victory is unlikely, including 48 percent who call it “not at all likely.”



The poll found little evidence that Taliban insurgents have succeeded in undermining the government’s authority. Three-fourths of Afghans (76%) say the central government is the “most powerful authority” in their area, while one-fifth (20%) say local leaders are. The Taliban are chosen as most powerful by only 2 percent. Nearly two-thirds (62%) also see the central government as the “most respected authority” in their area, compared to one third (31%) who selected local leaders. Taliban were chosen as the most respected by only 3 percent.

And despite an upsurge in Taliban attacks over the last year, most Afghans express fairly positive views of security in their area. This may reflect their high tolerance for insecurity, given Afghanistan’s history of violence in recent decades, or it may be an expression of their confidence that Taliban forces will not succeed in overthrowing their government.

Fifty-five percent describe security in their area as “good” and 29 percent call it “excellent.” These numbers are similar to those in an [August 2006 Asia Foundation poll](#), which found that 49 percent of Afghans believed security in their area was good and 17 percent said it was excellent.