Afghan Feelings of Security Vary Widely

October 31, 2006

Five years after the U.S.-led invasion—and despite intense violence in some regions—about half of Afghans (53%) say they feel safer today than they did under Taliban rule. But the results vary widely according to religious sect, ethnicity and region, a Gallup poll has found.

Less than half of Sunni Muslims (45%) say that security has improved since the Taliban government fell in November 2001 compared to nine out of ten Shias (89%). Fewer ethnic Pashtuns say they feel safer (39%) than do non-Pashtuns (64%). Those who live in southern Afghanistan are also less likely to see the country as more secure (25%) than those who live in the rest of the country (58%).

Most of those living in southern Afghanistan are ethnically Pashtun Sunni Muslims, as were most Taliban leaders. Southern Afghanistan has also been the site of an attempted Taliban resurgence, where violent clashes with NATO forces have killed hundreds of rebels and civilians.

The Gallup poll is based on a randomly selected national sample of 1,196 adults interviewed from June 13-Aug. 22, 2006. The survey took place during a period of intense battles in southern Kandahar province between NATO forces and the Taliban.

A World Public Opinion poll conducted Nov. 27 to Dec. 4, 2005, before the most recent upsurge in violence, also showed significant regional differences of opinion on security, though not as stark as those revealed by Gallup. WPO found that 53 percent of respondents living in war zones said their security was good compared to 70 percent in the rest of the country. WPO included both the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan, where most U.S.-led operations took place in 2005, in these zones.

The summer 2006 Gallup also asked respondents to comment more generally on whether their lives had improved since the Taliban's fall. Again, those living in northern Afghanistan were far more likely to see improvements than residents of the south. Outside of the south, nearly nine out of ten Afghans (87%) said things were better. In the south only 16 percent said things were better while 17 percent said they didn't know and 65 percent said worse.
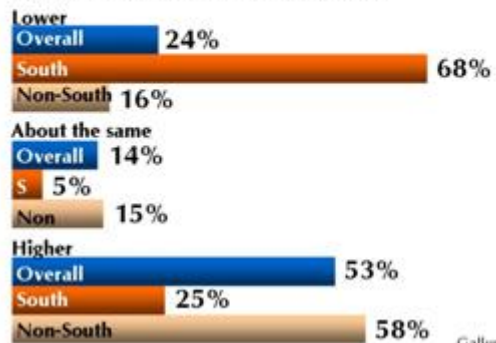
Overall, most Afghans believe things are better than before, regardless of religious beliefs or ethnicity. Seventy-five percent of all Afghan respondents said this, according to Gallup, including most Sunnis (71%) and nearly all Shias (94%).

In its Nov.-Dec. 2005 poll, WPO also showed that Afghans expressed largely positive attitudes about developments in their country. Eight out of ten said that Afghanistan was "headed in the right direction," while just 11 percent said it was going in the wrong direction. The WPO poll found that an overwhelming 88 percent had an unfavorable view of Taliban rule, including 51 percent of Pashtuns and 71 percent of those living in war zones. Eighty-two percent overall said that overthrowing the Taliban was a good thing.

Eighty percent of the Afghan population are Sunni Muslims, according to the CIA World Fact Book, and 19 percent are Shia. Pashtuns, most of whom are also Sunni, make up 42 percent of the Afghan population.
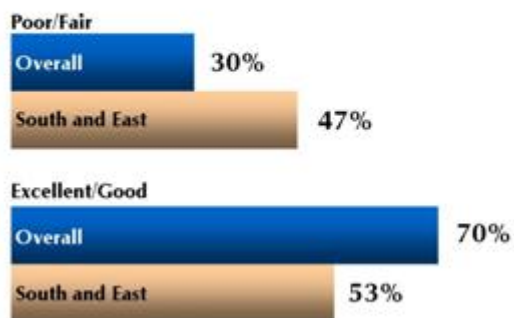
Afghans on Change in Security - Summer 2006

Do you think the level of security is lower, about the same, or higher than it was during the Taliban days?

Lower
- Overall: 24%
- South: 68%
- Non-South: 16%

About the same
- Overall: 14%
- S: 5%
- Non: 15%

Higher
- Overall: 53%
- South: 25%
- Non-South: 58%

Gallup, Summer 2006

Afghans Rate Security – Winter 2006

How would you rate the security situation in your area? Would you say excellent, good, fair, or poor?

Poor/Fair
- Overall: 30%
- South and East: 47%

Excellent/Good
- Overall: 70%
- South and East: 53%

WPO, 1/2006