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Pakistanis Want Larger Role for Both Islam and Democracy

Majority Reject 'Talibanization' and Favor Reform of Madrassas

Growing Perception that US Threatens Islam

Washington, DC, Jan 6—An in-depth survey of Pakistani public opinion reveals majority support for a moderate and democratic Islamic state, though a small but significant minority shows sympathy for Islamist militant groups.

Most Pakistanis want Islam to play a larger role in Pakistani society. However, a majority also favors a more democratic political system, rejects 'Talibanization," and supports recent government efforts to reform the madrassah system by focusing more on science and mathematics. Majorities have little sympathy for Islamist military groups and most would like to see the Federally Administered Tribal Areas integrated into Pakistan.

The survey also found that Pakistani attitudes toward the United States are negative and that there is a growing perception that the United States is hostile toward Islam.

The survey was conducted from Sept. 12-18, just before President Pervez Musharraf declared a six-week state of emergency and before the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The sample included 907 Pakistani urban adults, selected using multi-stage probability sampling, who were interviewed at home in 19 cities. The margin of error is +/- 3.3 percent.

It was conducted by WorldPublicOpinion.org in collaboration with, and with financial support from, the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org comments, "While Pakistan is racked by conflict between leaders and groups vying for power, this poll indicates that most Pakistanis largely agree on what kind of state they want and on how they want the government to deal with the many challenges it faces."

C. Christine Fair, senior research fellow of the US Institute of Peace (now at RAND) observes, "With Pakistan as perhaps the most important country in the war on terrorism, the good news is that majorities of Pakistanis view most militant groups in Pakistan as a threat. The bad news is that many Pakistanis view the U.S. with great suspicion. "

The survey finds strong public support for a wider role for Islam. Asked to gauge the importance of living "in a country that is governed according to Islamic principles" on a 10-point scale, 61 percent give an answer of 10 (meaning "absolutely important"). The mean response is 9.0. However, when asked to gauge the degree to which Pakistan is currently governed by Islamic principles, the mean score is just 4.6 (on a 0-10 scale with 10 meaning "completely").

Sixty percent want Shari'a to play a larger role, "as compared to current Pakistan law." Shari'a was formally introduced into the Pakistani court system in the 1970s and the country was founded as an Islamic republic. Support for a greater role for Shari'a may indicate that Pakistanis simply want their civil courts to function more effectively (the Pakistani justice system is well known for its long delays) rather than for a fundamental change.

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 is 8.4. Asked to rate Pakistan in this regard, the mean score is just 4.8 (with 10 meaning "completely"), though polling was conducted just before the imposition of emergency rule.

Interestingly, among the 60 percent who support a larger role for Shari'a larger role in the Pakistani legal system, nearly two out of three (64%) give the importance of democracy a 10—considerably higher than among those who do not favor more Shari'a.

Pakistanis also say it is important to live in a country where "the decisions of the courts are independent from influence by political and military authorities," giving it a mean score of 8.6 on the 10-point scale. Again, respondents give their country a relatively poor mean rating (5.6) in fulfilling this ideal.

There is little support among Pakistanis for a shift to extreme religious conservatism. Only a small minority (15%)—even among those who want a greater role for Shari'a—say they want to see more "Talibanization of daily life." Eighty-one percent say it is important for Pakistan to protect religious minorities—which have been frequent targets of militant violence—and three quarters (75-78 percent) say that attacks on specific religious minorities (Ahmadiyya and Shi'a) are never justified.

Perhaps most significantly, the survey identified substantial support for reforming the religious schools known as *madrassahs*. About two-thirds (64 percent) support a recent government plan to regulate the madrassahs, requiring them to register with the government and to spend more time on subjects like math and science. Only 17 percent are opposed to such reform efforts. Interestingly, those who want a larger role for Shari'a are more likely than others to strongly favor these reforms.

There is also little sympathy for Islamist militant groups operating in Pakistan. Three in five (60-62 percent) view the activities of al Qaeda, local Taliban, and Pakistani Islamist

militant groups as threats to Pakistan's vital interests. However, a significant 14 to 18 percent do not view these groups as a threat to Pakistan.

A large majority wants the special status of the region along the Afghan border known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to be phased out and for the FATA to be integrated into Pakistan's legal structure. Seventy-two percent think the Frontier Crimes Regulation should be changed so that people in FATA "have the same rights and responsibilities as all other Pakistanis." Only 8 percent think it should be left unchanged.

At the same time most of those polled prefer a gradual approach to integration of the FATA. Overall there is little support for a military crackdown on militant groups operating in these border regions. Given three options, just 23 percent would rather see the government exert control through military force while only 12 percent are in favor of simply withdrawing. A 46-percent plurality favors instead trying to keep the peace in the FATA through negotiations, presumably moving toward reintegration in the long run.

Pakistani views of the United States are quite negative. About two-thirds (64%) do not trust the United States "to act responsibly in the world." Very large majorities believe the US military presence in Afghanistan and in Asia is a critical threat to Pakistan's interests (68 percent and 72 percent respectively). Only 27 percent feel that the cooperation between Pakistan and the United States on security and military matters has benefited Pakistan.

There is a growing Pakistani perception that the United States is hostile to their desire for a more Islamic society. Indeed, 86 percent now say it is definitely (70%) or probably (16%) a US goal to "weaken and divide the Islamic world." This view also appears to be growing: it is up 13 points from February.

This view is highly correlated with negative views of the United States. Among those who strongly believe the US is seeking to undermine Islam, 57 percent say they do not trust the United States "at all." Among those who do not think this is a US goal, only 13 percent say they do not trust the United States at all.

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