

ACSOR/D3 Systems/Langer Research Associates: Afghan Futures

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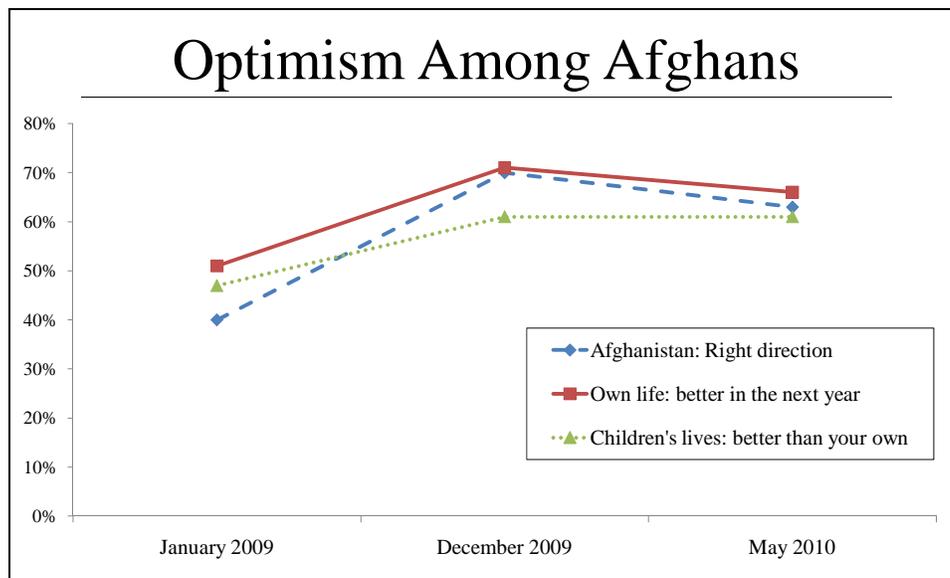
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Survey Finds Durability in Afghans' Optimism, More Support for Negotiations with the Taliban

Optimism among Afghans remained surprisingly durable in the first half of 2010, but with significant changes in attitudes on two fronts: Greater support for negotiations with the Taliban, and a drop in already tepid public preference for a democratic form of government.

Sharp regional differences remain, with optimism much weaker in the main conflict zone in the country's South. Nonetheless, overall 63 percent of Afghans interviewed in May said their country was going in the right direction, 66 percent expected improvements in their own lives a year off and 61 percent expected better lives for their children than for themselves.

Each is a key measure of national cohesion. Two were lower than their levels last winter – positive ratings of the country's direction, off by 7 points from late December; and expectations for a better life in the next year, down by a slight 5 points. Yet all remained far above their levels in early 2009, when development was stalled and the Taliban were seen as gaining strength.



As noted, views are less positive in the South; there 45 percent said the country's going in the right direction, 55 percent expected improvements in their own lives and 51 percent expected better lives for their children – respectively, 18, 11 and 10 points lower than the national figures. The first two also were lower in the South than their levels there in December.

The overall improvements in optimism last winter corresponded with factors including reduced civilian casualties, more effective development efforts, satisfaction with the outcome of the country's disputed presidential election, a sense the much-disliked Taliban had weakened and a somewhat less skeptical view of Pakistan's activities. As of May, when this newly released survey was conducted, it appears that despite some slippage, and challenges especially in the South, much of those gains still held sway.

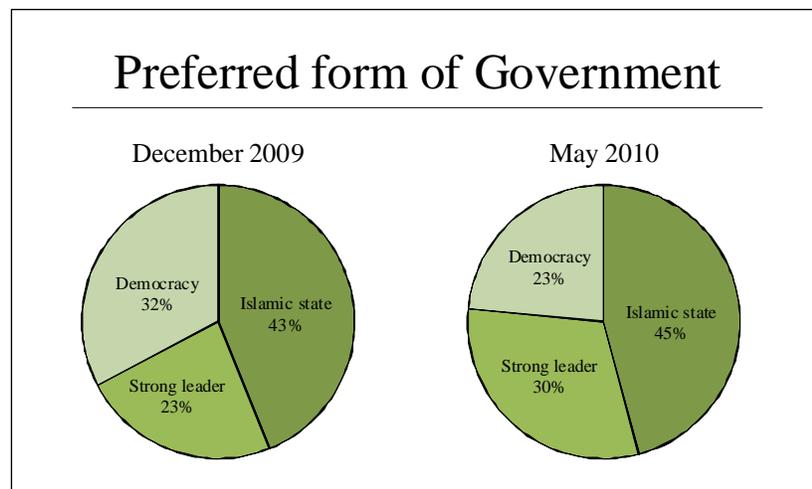
Indeed, despite the country's troubles, 60 percent of Afghans said they are living better than their parents did, while just 18 percent said their lives are worse. Six in 10 men and women alike said so, as did majorities in each region of the country. The most negative views again were in the more heavily contested South, and the East, where one in four said their lives were worse than their parents' had been.

Attitudes since May – and their future course – await further data, with concern warranted given the rise in civilian casualties as fighting has intensified. The United Nations reported last month that civilian deaths in the first half of the year were up by 25 percent over the same period in 2009, to 1,721; however, it also said anti-government insurgents were responsible for the spike – a key metric, since blame on Western forces for civilian casualties is among the single biggest predictors of opposition to the U.S. and NATO presence in Afghanistan.

The May results represent the most recent publicly available nationally representative survey research from Afghanistan. The survey was produced by the Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research (ACSOR) in Kabul, a subsidiary of D3 Systems in Vienna, Va., as part of its Afghan Futures project, and provided exclusively to Langer Research Associates, a New York-based survey research firm providing public opinion polling and consulting services to ABC News and other clients. As well as taking new directions, the survey repeated several questions asked since 2005, and as recently as last December, in a series of polls by ACSOR for ABC and international media partners including the BBC and ARD German Television

Some Erosion

There were some changes in addition to the modest declines in optimism. In May, 71 percent of Afghans declared themselves as satisfied with the outcome of the election that saw Hamid Karzai



return to power as president, little changed from 75 percent in late December. But the number who were “very satisfied” with this outcome was just 27 percent – down 10 points.

Moreover, preference for democracy as the best political system for Afghanistan at this time fell from 32 percent in December to 23 percent in

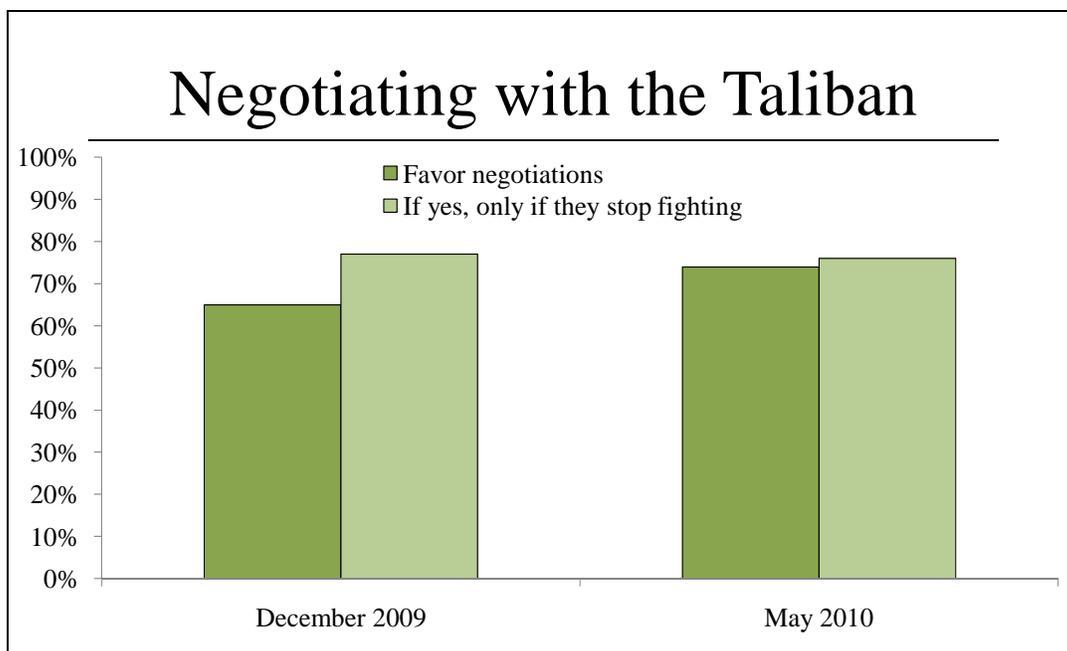
May. As can happen in some societies in times of crisis, preference for a “strong leader” – “where one man rules for life and has final say in all political matters” – rose, by 7 points, to 30 percent, surpassing preference for democracy. And a plurality in this nearly entirely Muslim nation continued to prefer an Islamic state, 45 percent.

There was a similar increase in support for a “strong leader” in Iraq as that country fell into a spiral of violence in 2007. That reversed course and fell dramatically by early 2009 as relative security in Iraq was restored. At the same time, in polling from 2004-2009, support for an Islamic state in Iraq never remotely approached its levels in Afghanistan.

Taliban

Another notable change is in views of the Karzai government’s approach to the Taliban. Seventy-four percent of Afghans favored negotiations in which the Taliban would be allowed to hold political offices if it agrees to stop fighting, up 9 points from December to May.

There is a hitch, though: Among those who favored negotiations, three-quarters (76 percent) said talks should occur only if the Taliban first stops fighting – about the same as previously.



Security

As frequently occurs in public sentiment, there were sharp differences between assessments of local conditions on one hand, and national priorities on the other. Perhaps surprisingly, 84 percent of Afghans rated the security in their own area positively. But they didn’t do so enthusiastically – 40 percent rated local security as “very good,” vs. 43 percent as just “somewhat good.”

And regardless of local conditions, security remained the predominant national concern: Fifty percent called security (or closely related matters) the single most important issue in bringing stability to Afghanistan, broad agreement on an open-ended question. All other answers were in the single-digits, led by education, reconstruction and reducing poverty.

Local security ratings were variable: While just 15 percent nationally said the security in their area was bad or very bad, that spiked to 39 percent in the South. Still, 81 percent of Afghans overall said they were willing to travel outside their village (or neighborhood), and 73 percent were willing to travel outside their district – including sizable numbers even in the South (73 and 61 percent, respectively).

Corruption

There have been suggestions that widespread corruption may alienate Afghans from the Karzai government and encourage support for the Taliban. Corruption clearly is broadly recognized; last December, Afghans almost unanimously called it a problem. However its salience is somewhat muted. Few in this survey, 8 percent, mentioned corruption as the single most important issue in bringing stability to the country, and 23 percent mentioned it as one of the top three issues (peaking at 31 percent in the South). That compares to 50 percent, as noted, calling security the single top issue, and 75 percent calling it one of the top three concerns. While corruption may be a serious obstacle to progress, security reigns as the top concern.

Similarly, a regression analysis based on the ABC/BBC/ARD poll in Afghanistan in December finds that concerns about corruption did not independently predict either opposition to the Karzai government or support for Taliban (which was very limited in any case). Ratings of local living conditions, security and future prospects did.

Rebuilding

Security isn't the only issue; reconstruction remains powerful in its own right, with water, roads, bridges and schools cited as the most pressing needs.

Forty-four percent of Afghans said reconstruction led by the Afghan government, non-government organizations or Western forces has occurred in their area. The presence of these reconstruction efforts independently predicts optimism among Afghans for the country's direction, their own lives and their children's future, regardless of security. The more the impact of reconstruction is felt by the local population, the brighter its outlook.

That result, as with previous polls in Afghanistan, underscores that public support is based on a mosaic of needs – not security alone, but reconstruction and economic development as well. At the same time most Afghans, 57 percent, expressed the opinion that security is the necessary first condition, and that rebuilding the country can only follow.

In an important finding for reconstruction efforts, willingness for engagement was high. Eight in 10 Afghans said they'd be at least somewhat willing to participate in reconstruction work, and, among men who reported such projects locally, 89 percent said they'd be willing to participate in

“community defense” to protect them. Seventy-three percent of Afghans, moreover, said they’d be willing to start a new business if they had access to funding and training.

There are, nonetheless, challenges for outside involvement. While Afghans broadly favor having “the international community” substantially involved in financing and managing reconstruction and development projects, there’s a barrier to cooperation on the ground: Fifty-five percent of Afghans said they’re not willing to “work with a Westerner in the same place.”

Part of that is cultural; while 42 percent of men said they’re unwilling to work with Westerners, that soared to 69 percent among women. There’s a geographical aspect as well, and a counterintuitive one: Willingness to work with Westerners was lowest in the Central and Northern regions of the country – perhaps because greater stability there made it seem less necessary – while it peaked in the conflict areas of the South and East.

	Willing to work with Westerners?	
	Yes	No
All	41%	55
Men	56	42
Women	26	69
Central/North	34	65
West	45	52
South/East	53	41
Central/North, men	49	50
Central/North, women	19	80
West, men	54	43
West, women	36	60
South/East, men	69	30
South/East, women	34	54

Government Authority

This hesitancy is far from the only barrier to developing the country. A substantial number of Afghans, 43 percent, described themselves as unwilling to report a crime to the Afghan National Police. And for a variety of legal issues – land and commercial disputes, inheritance issues, personal injury among them – minorities said they’d be inclined to use the government courts, as opposed to other options (e.g., a shura or jirga council, a tribal leader or a local elder).

To some degree this likely signals more of a social inclination to settle civil disputes locally, rather than a rejection of government authority more broadly; majorities did prefer government justice in more serious cases, e.g. 64 percent in cases of murder. Still, that leaves a third of Afghans who wouldn’t be inclined to use the state justice system even in murder cases – hardly a ringing endorsement of government authority.

On the other hand, the survey found very little interest in using a Taliban court as an alternative, peaking at 3 or 4 percent in cases alleging adultery, theft or murder – underscoring previous polls in which very large majorities of Afghans consistently have rejected Taliban leadership.

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Methodology and Trend Data

This survey was conducted May 12-24, 2010, by the Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research (ACSOR) in Kabul via in-person interviews with a random national sample of 2,056 Afghan adults in all 34 of the country’s provinces. Nineteen of the 136 originally sampled districts and 11 of the 262 settlements could not be reached because of security concerns and were randomly replaced with sampling points in the same province or district. Women could not be interviewed in four provinces (Paktia, Paktika, Uruzghan and Zabul), representing 6 percent of the national population, also because of security concerns. Data were weighted by sex within region. The survey has a theoretical margin of sampling error of 2 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.39.

Data collection by ACSOR/D3 Systems; data analysis by Langer Research Associates.

See below for key results reported in this analysis, including trended results of questions repeated from previous surveys sponsored by ABC News and its partners. For the full topline results and a methodology report see <http://www.D3Systems.com>. For further details contact ACSOR/D3 Systems, 703 255-0884; or Langer Research Associates at info@langerresearch.com.

1. In your opinion, do you think you are living better or worse than your parents were living when they were your age?

	Better	Worse	Same	No opinion
5/24/10	60	18	21	2

2. Do you think your children will have a better life than you, worse, or about the same?

	Better	Worse	Same	No opinion
5/24/10	61	10	18	12
12/23/09	61	11	19	9
1/12/09	47	14	21	18
11/7/07	51	11	21	17

3. 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?

	Right	Wrong	Mixed (vol.)	No opinion
5/24/10	63	23	10	3
12/23/09	70	21	5	3
1/12/09	40	38	14	9
11/7/07	54	24	15	7
10/19/06	55	22	17	5
10/18/05	77	6	11	6
3/13/04	64	11	8	16

4. What is your expectation for things overall in your life a year from now? Will they be much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse?

	----- Better -----				----- Worse -----			No opinion
	NET	Much	Somewhat	Same	NET	Somewhat	Much	
5/24/10	66	30	35	22	7	6	1	6
12/23/09	71	31	40	19	5	4	1	5
1/12/09	51	14	37	28	12	10	3	8
11/7/07	50	14	36	26	9	7	2	15
10/19/06	54	11	43	23	9	7	2	14
10/18/05	67	23	44	13	1	0	1	19

11. There can be differences between the ways government is set up in a country, called the political system. From the three options I am going to read to you, which one do you think is best for Afghanistan at this time - strong leader, where one man rules for life and has final say in all political matters; Islamic state, where religious authorities have final say in all political matters; or Democracy, where the people can vote in elections to choose political leaders who then direct political matters?

	Strong leader	Islamic state	Democracy	No opinion
5/24/10	30	45	23	1
12/23/09	23	43	32	3

13. Looking back to the final outcome of the August 2009 presidential election, would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat unsatisfied, or very unsatisfied?

	----- Satisfied -----			----- Unsatisfied -----			No opinion
	NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Very	
5/24/10	71	27	45	27	20	7	2
12/23/09*	75	37	38	23	13	9	2

*Wording: What is your reaction to the final outcome of last summer's presidential election? Would you say you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat unsatisfied, or very unsatisfied?

18. Do you think the government in Kabul should negotiate a settlement with Afghan Taliban in which they are allowed to hold political offices if they agree to stop fighting, or do you think the government in Kabul should continue to fight the Taliban and not enter into these negotiations?

	Negotiate with Taliban	Continue fighting/ Do not negotiate	No opinion
5/24/10	74	23	3
12/23/09	65	28	7
1/12/09	64	25	11
11/7/07	60	32	8

19. (IF NEGOTIATE) Do you think the government should negotiate only if the Taliban first stop fighting, or negotiate even as fighting continues?

	Only if Taliban stops fighting	Even as fighting continues	No opinion
5/24/10	76	24	1
12/23/09	77	23	1
1/12/09	71	29	1

q18/q19 NET

	----- Negotiate -----				
	NET	Only if Taliban stops fighting	Even as fighting continues	Continue fighting/ Do not negotiate	No opinion
5/24/10	73	56	17	26	1
12/23/09	65	50	15	28	7
1/12/09	64	45	18	25	11

20. How would you describe the level of security in your neighborhood today? Is it very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad or very bad?

	----- Good -----			----- Bad -----			No opinion
	NET	Much	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Much	
5/24/10	84	40	43	15	11	5	1

23. People have different views about whether or not security is needed before reconstruction and development can take place. From the three options I am going to read to you, which one do you think applies in Afghanistan at this time.

	5/24/10
Security must be achieved before	57
Afghanistan can be re-built at the same time	35
Afghanistan can be re-built without having to focus on security	7

Data source: 5/10, ACSOR/D3 Systems; 11/07-12/09, ABC News/BBC/ARD; 10/06, ABC News/BBC World Service; 10/05, ABC News; 3/04, Charney Research

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