

Editorials and Commentary



A radical turnabout in Pakistan

In just five months, public approval of Osama bin Laden has dropped by half.

By Kenneth Ballen and Reza Aslan

February 21, 27, 2008

Washington and Los Angeles

This week's election results in Pakistan give Islamabad's next government the mandate to finally put the terrorists out of business. Violence in Pakistan – mostly driven by Taliban and pro-Al Qaeda forces – has not abated since the December assassination of leading opposition candidate and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. But in a potential hinge moment for what Newsweek recently called "the most dangerous nation in the world," Pakistani public opinion has turned dramatically and decisively against the radicals.

Last August, Terror Free Tomorrow (TFT) conducted a survey across Pakistan showing that from one-third to one-half of Pakistanis had a favorable opinion of Al Qaeda and related radical Islamist groups. Nearly half of respondents had a positive view of Osama bin Laden.

But now, the momentous events of the past several months – President Musharraf's crackdown against the press and opposition figures, mounting terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda and the Taliban, the assassination of Bhutto, and the campaign leading up to Monday's unprecedented election – have resulted in a sea change in Pakistani public opinion.

In a new nationwide survey conducted last month, Pakistani public support for Al Qaeda, the Taliban, bin Laden and other radical Islamist groups has plummeted by half – all the way down to the teens and single digits. The bottom has fallen out for support of the radicals.

If Al Qaeda had appeared on the ballot as a political party in the election, only 1 percent of Pakistanis would have voted for them. The Taliban would have drawn just 3 percent of the vote.

Even in areas near or in their home base, Al Qaeda and the Taliban are losing public support. Favorable opinions of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the North-West Frontier Province have sunk to single digits. In August, 70 percent of the population of this region expressed a favorable opinion of bin Laden. Today just 4 percent do.

Indeed, these survey results mirror the stinging defeat of the Islamist parties at the hands of the voters in the North-West Frontier Province. The religious parties were big losers there, winning just nine seats in the provincial assembly, as opposed to 67 in the 2002 elections.

Given the public's dramatic turnaround against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, particularly in their home base, there is a singular opportunity for a Pakistani government with the support of the people to have the legitimacy to mount an effective campaign against the terrorists.

The public's turn against the radicals was accompanied by an equally stunning move toward Pakistan's moderate, secular political parties. In TFT's August survey, only 39 percent backed the principal moderate political parties. In our January pre-election survey, 62 percent said they intended to vote for the moderate political parties in the Feb. 18 elections.

The actual election results now show that about the same percentage, in fact, voted for the moderate political parties.

The fact is, Pakistan includes a mostly young, sophisticated, and upwardly mobile population that aspires to the ideals of democracy and rule of law. If given the opportunity to choose their leaders, there can no longer be any question but they will overwhelmingly elect moderate parties, giving Pakistan a government that finally enjoys the popular legitimacy necessary to mount an effective military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban – a legitimacy that Mr. Musharraf so clearly lacks.

Pakistan can still be an ally to the United States in its struggle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban, but only if democracy is allowed to flourish.

Last Thursday, Musharraf said that the methods of TFT and other polling organizations "have value in developed countries but not here." Perhaps because, as a leading national independent Pakistani newspaper concluded, polling helped make "rigging of the elections somewhat difficult."

As Pakistan's moderate parties now consolidate power, they, too, should heed public opinion and remember that there are two mandates from this election. In addition to the widespread support that has swept the moderates to power, the Pakistani public has just as powerfully rejected extremism in all its forms.

Bhutto gave her life for the belief that a freer, more democratic Pakistan would in and of itself be a better partner to the US in the war on terror – indeed, that the people could be the strongest bulwark against the radicals.

Pakistan, with a new American policy that supports democracy, development, and economic opportunity, can help ensure that her dream did not pass away along with her.

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February 15-17, 2008

"In our latest poll a week before Pakistan's election, Pakistani public support for Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Bin Laden and other radical Islamist groups has plummeted by half, from just a few months ago. The last time we conducted a survey, Bin Laden had a 70 percent favorable rating in the North-West Frontier Province. That's now down to just a mere 4 percent—a dramatic drop.

"If Al Qaeda were on the ballot, we found that only 1 percent of Pakistanis would vote for them.

"This sharp loss of public support, together with the attacks on Pakistani authorities, could give Pakistan's next government the mandate to finally put Pakistan's militants out of business

"The meaning of our new poll is unmistakable. Since the people now overwhelmingly reject Al Qaeda and the radicals while embracing the moderate parties, a truly free and fair election in Pakistan would result in a clear victory for the forces of moderation and a defeat for the radicals."

Ken Ballen, TFT President

INTERNATIONAL
THE NEWS

Pakistan 2/12/08

The findings of a US-based organization, Terror Free Tomorrow (TFT), provide an important reality check and show that the widespread talk of rapid 'Talibanization' is largely a result of coercive tactics used by well-armed extremist outfits.

The poll also shows that, amidst a spate of deadly terrorist attacks, support for Al-Qaeda fell from 33 per cent in August 2007 to 18 per cent last month. Similarly, backing for the Taliban fell from 38 to 19 per cent over an identical period. The reinforcement of the belief that most across the country remain bitterly opposed to extremism is reassuring.

At a broader level, the reassertion of the fact that very few have any sympathy for the crazed clerics who run extremist organizations acts as a reminder of the need to rescue people from the excesses and ensure the democratic, moderate forces most Pakistanis back are able to play their rightful role in the national political sphere.

A survey by Terror Free Tomorrow (TFT) was conducted in all four provinces of Pakistan during the second half of the last month. The total sample was made up of 1,157 men and women with a margin of error of plus or minus three percent. The survey has shown that most respondents support the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and favour the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), while the PML(Quaid) also has its support base.

It is heartening to note, that the approval ratings for Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda and the Taliban have registered nosedived phenomenally and stand at only half of what these were a few month ago.

The TFT survey concludes that if al Qaeda were contesting the parliamentary elections, only one percent voters would have nodded the dreaded outfit while its allies Taliban would have garnered a meagre three percent.

The emerging trends in public opinion only go to demonstrate what many political observers have been saying consistently. The elicited sample of public opinion also shows that people are not willing to confuse the political crisis with that of the religious militancy.

The electoral trends, shown by the TFT poll, only accentuate the need for free, fair and transparent elections. Any attempt to tamper with the elections in the wake of a sharply polarised public opinion may not portend well for the democratic and forward-looking future of this country.

Daily Times

Your right to know A new voice for a new Pakistan

February 12; 16 and 17, 2008

A pre-election survey conducted in Pakistan by US-based Terror Free Tomorrow (TFT), whose governing board includes Republican presidential front-runner John McCain and former congressman Lee Hamilton, says 62 percent of the respondents' support the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), while only 12 percent are in favour of the PML-Quaid (PMLQ). Because of the "sympathy wave" 36.7 percent support the PPP and 25.3 percent favour the PMLN. The survey was conducted in Pakistan's four provinces from January 19 to 29 this year and the total sample was 1,157 men and women, with a margin of error of plus or minus three percent.

We don't know if this sample will translate into voters voting in the same percentage because the voting population is different from those who would have an opinion to express. Yet, most surveys keep pretty close to performance on ground when the electoral process begins to unfold.

President Pervez Musharraf expressed his worries Thursday when he warned against the issuance of "electoral surveys." He told a seminar organised by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting that the methods adopted by surveying companies "have value in developed countries but not here."

The truth is that election surveys are a part of the electoral environment everywhere. Polls are held all over the world where there is freedom of expression. They have been accepted as valid and usually prove uncannily accurate.

In Pakistan these surveys are registering their effect the same way as they do in neighbouring India and Bangladesh. They are based on regional samplings and they tend to express the popular bias even as they serve to strengthen it.

INTERNATIONAL
THE NEWS

Pakistan 2/13/08

The TFT poll proves that public opinion is fast turning against the so-called heroes and villains of the war on terrorism. If 70 percent want Musharraf to quit and 62 percent accuse the agencies and parties aligned with the president of complicity in Ms Benazir Bhutto's assassination, the support for the Taliban and Al Qaeda has reduced by half. A vote against Musharraf and Taliban -Al Qaeda and overwhelmingly favouring the moderates-democrats is quite stunning in many ways.

INTERNATIONAL
THE NEWS

Pakistan 2/14/08

The poll by the independent, US-based organization, Terror Free Tomorrow, which shows only one percent of people in Pakistan back Al-Qaeda and only three percent favour the Taliban indicates these forces have every motive to destroy the democratic process, through which they can have no hope of attaining any measure of power.

But the spate of suicide bombings the country has seen recently, taking a terrible toll on lives, also underscores the fact that for any government formed after the polls, the need to tackle it must be among their primary priorities. Despite the lack of any kind of mass appeal, and the reassuring poll findings that

most people bitterly oppose them, the fact is that extremist violence is influencing the texture of society; making Pakistan a more brutalized, more violent society to live in than ever before.

INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

Pakistan 2/18/08

President Musharraf and his officials have started questioning the validity of polling data. According to their mindset, opinion polls might reflect the views of the public in modern societies but Pakistani society is somehow not ready for such scientific measurements of public opinion.

The fact is that opinion polls are an essential part of modern-day democracy. The government's problem is not with the methodology of the opinion polls. It is with their outcome.

Instead of denying the reality of public opinion, the general and his ruling team have another choice. They could bow to public opinion and allow Pakistan to move into the twenty-first century as a democracy.



Is President Musharraf more like Ferdinand Marcos, the Filipino dictator deposed in favour of democracy? Or is he the Shah of Iran, whose fall resulted in a radical, anti-American regime? It is President Musharraf's own view that is most instructive. According to one report, he mentions a third ruler as his model Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak has survived by presenting America with a choice: his own oppressive military rule, or the triumph of the Islamists: the pharaoh or fanatics. He has done his best to guarantee that these are only choices.

President Musharraf seems to be on the same path. Talking about fighting radicalism, his real energy has been devoted to imprisoning and harassing his democratic opponents. As in Egypt, this approach has elevated Islamists.

Polling by the non-profit group, Terror Free Tomorrow, shows broad Pakistani support for democracy, coupled with considerable sympathy for radical groups that oppose the military regime. In the long-run, propping up favourable dictators to fight terrorism causes a backlash.

INTERNATIONAL
THE NEWS

Pakistan 2/24/08

Remember how Musharraf had shown a great disapproval of the public opinion polls that found the president and his party going down and down in approval ratings? Less than a week before the elections, he had maintained that his supporters would gain a majority. What matters now is the verdict of the people.

Democracy may slow down America's 'war on terror' but a suicide attack every week—and Shaheed Bhutto's assassination—has turned the tide against extremism (according to a survey by Terror Free Tomorrow, in August 2007, 33 percent Pakistanis had a favourable opinion of Al-Qaida and in January 2008 favourable opinion had gone down to 18 percent).

Pakistani voters have done what they could. It's now up to the PPP and the PML-N to reverse our march towards chaos, discord and lawlessness. Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif must respect democracy's verdict—or remember her revenge.

The Economist

February 21, 2008

In public at least, President Pervez Musharraf dismissed the opinion polls, seeing them as no more reliable than the foreign reporters whom he castigated for not leaving the big cities to talk to people in the real Pakistan.

Mr. Musharraf admitted before the election that the party backing him might not win an outright majority; but not that it would be beaten by both the big opposition parties, as it has been. In the end the voters proved him conclusively wrong and by and large vindicated the pollsters.

The Washington Post

February 12, 2008

Reputable polling shows that Pakistanis will vote overwhelmingly against President Pervez Musharraf in parliamentary elections Monday -- but the government plans to rig the balloting to prevent that outcome, at the risk of triggering massive protests and violence.

MIDDLE EAST TIMES.

February 14, 2008

The TFT poll shows that discontent with Musharraf has not translated into support for extremism, quite the opposite in fact. There has been an upsurge in suicide bombings in Pakistan recently, and perhaps nothing causes a reassessment of terrorist groups as effectively as being a victim of their terrorism.

In any case, if the Taliban were on next week's ballot they would draw 3 percent of the vote, while al-Qaida would manage only 1 percent. Since last August, those with a favorable view of Bin Laden have dropped from 46 percent to 24 percent, while approval of radical Islamist groups in general has fallen from almost 50 percent to less than 25 percent. Most striking, support in the North-West Frontier Province where al-Qaida and the Taliban have their bases has dropped into single figures, with Bin Laden having fallen from 70 percent favorable to 4 percent since August.

The beneficiaries in all this are the two main moderate political parties, the Pakistan People's Party of assassinated Benazir Bhutto, and the Pakistan Muslim League of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Sixty-two percent say they will now vote for one of these two parties compared with only 39 percent back in August, according to the TFT poll.

Musharraf has presented himself to the United States as the last bastion against extremism. These figures give the lie to that contention. Pakistanis will not turn from a Musharraf government to some form of jihadism. In light of that, the U.S. government should ask itself whether Musharraf is still the horse to back in Pakistan, given his high negatives and the fact that only 9 percent of Pakistanis want to cooperate with the United States in the war on terror.

ROLL CALL

February 15, 2008

The second-most important election of the year for Americans is scheduled to occur next Monday in Pakistan, determining whether that nuclear-armed and terrorist-infested nation moves toward democracy or chaos....

According to a poll by the independent group Terror Free Tomorrow, 58 percent of Pakistanis believe that Musharraf's government was responsible for Benazir Bhutto's assassination. In the TFT poll, with a sample of 1,157, 70 percent of the respondents said they wanted Musharraf to resign immediately.

Most significantly, TFT found that 62 percent of voters said they would support Bhutto's liberal PPP or the other main democratic opposition party, the PML-N headed by conservative former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and only 12 percent Musharraf's PML-Q.

Perhaps the most significant poll findings are that the democratic opposition parties are on the cusp of winning two-thirds of the vote. If they controlled two-thirds of the seats in parliament, they could oust Musharraf and change the constitution to deprive any president of the power to depose an elected government.

If PML-Q is declared the winner, or if the opposition falls significantly short of a majority in parliament, there are likely to be huge street demonstrations. They'd likely start out peaceful, but could turn violent.

The stakes in this election could not be higher. As Bhutto writes in her posthumously published new book, "Reconciliation," Pakistan is "ground-zero" in the battle within Islam between reformers and jihadists and between those who want to provoke a "clash of civilizations" with the West and those who want to prevent it.

Bush has delivered great speeches about fostering democracy in the Islamic world. Now, he has to deliver.