



AFGANISTAN/NATO: Opinion polls do not signal progress

Friday, December 14 2007

EVENT: UK Defence Minister Des Browne yesterday said that NATO was making "tangible" progress in Afghanistan.

SIGNIFICANCE: Recent polls of Afghan opinion by Environics, the Asia Foundation, and Charney Research have been cited as evidence of 'good news' emerging from Afghanistan. However, there are methodological problems inherent in measuring the battle for 'hearts and minds' in conflict zones, which can make such results misleading or incorrect.

ANALYSIS: Public opinion polling in Afghanistan has grown in sophistication and reach. The country's first publicly released comprehensive public opinion poll gauged attitudes of Afghans towards their forthcoming elections in 2004. Now, in 2007, with a sustained acceleration in insurgent activity, polls have been commissioned to assess the effectiveness of the international military mission.

Polls can be useful indicators in counter-insurgency environments (see [US/IRAQ: Adaptive insurgents pose withdrawal challenge - January 20, 2006](#)). By comparing Afghan poll data against those of Iraq, UK, US and Canadian officials have suggested that Afghanistan is presently at less risk than Iraq and that 'significant progress' is being made there.

Limitations of polling. However, analysis of the polling process in Afghanistan indicates that a significant degree of bias enters into public opinion findings. Eliminating these biases is extremely difficult, if not impossible. The Afghan Center for Social and Opinion Research, the main facilitator for nationwide public opinion polling in Afghanistan, has steadily improved its reach and methodological rigour over three years of polling. However, logistical barriers limit their findings:

- **Rampant insecurity.** Insecurity tends to eliminate or exclude from the data set precisely the populations that are of most concern -- those living in areas of violent uprising.
- **Limited infrastructure.** Poor or non-existent infrastructure skews polls towards Afghan populations living close to main roads, rather than in remote areas, due to cost considerations. This suggests that populations that have received fewer development benefits would tend to be under-represented in the sample.
- **No baseline data.** Lack of census data means that the representativeness of the poll sample cannot be determined.

To give only one example, polled populations in Afghanistan consistently show school attendance rates of 40%-50% in a country with a 23.5% literacy rate, indicating that responses from the polls' several thousand respondents cannot be generalised to the entire Afghan population.

Respondent pragmatism and culture. Furthermore, field experience suggests that Afghans, for political as well as cultural reasons, often do not offer accurate personal opinions in polling situations. The likelihood of inaccuracy depends on the nature of the question and involves many factors, including:

- self-preservation in not wanting to be seen as a Taliban sympathiser (see [AFGHANISTAN: Taliban presence in the north is growing - November 26, 2007](#));
- self-interest in not criticising the dominant powers providing development funding to their area;
- fear that criticism of military groups in Afghanistan, including the local military and police, would result in retribution -- as had been the case for many during the Soviet occupation;
- suspicion of external agendas; and
- cognitive difficulties due to mental health problems and poor education (many Afghan women are innumerate and do not know their own age).

The importance of the clan and a culture of deferring to elders also raise questions whether personal opinions, as understood in the West, are common in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the hostility that many Muslims feel towards the United States increases the likelihood of deliberate misinformation by some Afghan poll respondents (see [US/INTERNATIONAL: Hostile Muslim views are entrenched - January 22, 2007](#)). Anti-Western sentiments have not been as apparent in Afghan public opinion polling as other research or explosive rioting in Kabul would suggest.

Interpretation is key. Polling is not yet a sufficiently tried and tested system in Afghanistan for there to be confidence in the meaning of public opinion findings. There are also strong indications of bias. Stand-alone poll results can be very misleading in suggesting that a 'majority' or 'minority' hold a particular opinion. However, when simple, straightforward questionnaires are repeated over time, the trend information is useful.

Polling trends. Nine public opinion polls in the 2004-07 period have repeatedly posited the question "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"? The tendency has been for the public mood to worsen across time gradually, with a high of 83% believing the country was heading in the 'right direction' in December 2005, and a low of 42% in June 2007.

However, this analysis has two important caveats:

- The ambiguity of poll wording has left the meaning of 'heading in the right direction' open to different interpretations by the Afghan respondent.
- Changes in the poll questionnaires have placed the 'right direction question' at the start of short questionnaires in some cases, and in the middle of lengthy, complicated questionnaires in others, possibly influencing responses.

Effective triangulation. The problematic nature of opinion polling in areas such as Afghanistan indicates that more complex, multi-dimensional metrics are required to assess the progress of the international counter-insurgency, aid and reconstruction effort. These may include:

- tracking declarations of support, such as fluctuations in opinion polls on whether the Taliban/al-Qaida and NATO are seen as 'positive influences', in relative terms, over time;
- following issues of personal concern to Afghans, such as the rise in suicide bombings and the meaning of such events for Afghan civilians;
- counting events that increase the legitimacy for the military mission, versus violent 'anti-foreigner' uprisings; and
- tracking local media for indications of elite opinion on the conflict.

Other sources of public opinion data, including open-ended, extended interviews, could identify issues that would otherwise be missed in the rigid structure of a poll.

Pitfalls for policymakers. Even so, linking public opinion in Afghanistan to policy decisions is problematic:

- **Policy justification.** Polarised domestic opinion in countries debating continued engagement in Afghanistan, such as Canada, is unlikely to trust that Afghan public opinion polls are neutral. Government attempts to justify Afghan policy on the grounds of a poll in a distant country are unlikely to be convincing.
- **Pakistan matters.** Public opinion in Pakistan also matters, as is clear from the flow of insurgents across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Afghan public opinion, even if accurate, would offer only partial insight into the insurgency.

CONCLUSION: Despite recent poll results, the public outlook is unlikely to be improving in Afghanistan. Polling in conflict zones is limited and not analogous to Western opinion surveys, and should be used by policymakers with care, in conjunction with other data. Due to their inherent biases, such polls are best used to measure trends rather than absolute figures.

Keywords: NA, Afghanistan, International, NATO, Iraq, Pakistan, United Kingdom, United States, international relations, politics, social, ethnic, foreign policy, military, security, terrorism, war, aid, defence, education, election, health, infrastructure, media, police, poverty, religion

Word Count (approx): 1079

