

IRI Pakistan Index

Social Indicators

Over the course of its polling program, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has tracked a number of indicators in order to gauge the overall mood of the population. Recent polling indicates that the Pakistani people have a high degree of pessimism and discontent.

- When asked if they felt that the country was headed in the right or wrong direction, 88 percent responded wrong direction while 11 percent said right direction. These ratings are slightly worse than the sentiment in January 2008, shortly before Pakistanis went to the polls and voted a new government into power in February 2008.
- When asked about their personal economic situation over the course of the past year, 73 percent said it improved, 12 percent said it worsened, and 14 percent said that it remained the same, essentially unchanged since January 2008.
- More significant, however, was the large spike in the pessimism regarding their personal economic future. When asked if they felt that their economic well being would improve or worsen during the upcoming year, 59 percent said they felt it would worsen, as compared to 46 percent in the June 2008 poll and 48 percent in the January 2008 poll. Again, when compared to the January poll taken shortly before national elections, this higher level of pessimism is a warning sign for the new government.
- The October poll also saw an increase in the number of people that felt less secure this year than they did last year, rising from 15 points in the June 2008 poll to 78 percent in October. The high of 85 percent occurred in January 2008 after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and resulting violence.

The New Government

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)-led government is bearing the brunt of this discontent. The October poll witnessed a dramatic decline in their ratings across the board.

- When asked how the government has performed on issues important to them, 21 percent responded positively and 76 percent responded negatively. This is approaching the 80 percent negative rating the last government received shortly before the February 2008 parliamentary elections.
- When asked to rate various institutions, 31 percent of respondents said that they had a favorable impression of the government, a 54 point drop from the 85 percent favorable rating it received in June 2008. Whereas the government was the highest rated institution in the last poll, it is now tied for last. Again, this 31 percent is roughly in line with the 29 percent favorable rating that the previous government received in January 2008 shortly before it was voted out of office.

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- The discontent and pessimism expressed by Pakistanis is coloring their perceptions of democracy in general. When asked if they thought that things would be better in Pakistan now that there was a democratically-elected president and parliament, 15 percent responded in the affirmative while 67 percent replied no. Further, when asked if they felt that the country had made important steps towards democracy, citing the separation of the offices of Army chief of staff and president, the resignation of President Pervez Musharraf, and the democratic election of a new parliament and president, 28 percent said yes while 52 percent said no.
- Pakistanis were ambivalent regarding the recent falling out between Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PML-N) and the PPP that led to PML-N pulling out of the coalition. Whereas only 30 percent said that they wanted the coalition to stay together, 42 percent said that they wanted PML-N to rejoin the government. Voters were clearer when it came to assigning responsibility for the falling out; 60 percent said it was the fault of President Asif Zardari, while 19 percent blamed Nawaz Sharif. However, 42 percent did agree with the statement that now was the time for national unity and that Nawaz Sharif pulled out of the government because he merely wanted more power.
- When asked if they thought that PPP should now form a coalition with Pakistan Muslim – Quaid (PML-Q), 27 percent said yes, up eight points from the June poll. As for PML-Q's options, 17 percent said that the party should form a coalition with PPP, while 52 percent preferred a merger with PML-N. The 51 percent preferring a merger is up 31 points since the June poll.

Key Issues

- *Economy*
 - When asked to choose their most important issue from a list provided, 58 percent cited inflation, 12 percent chose unemployment, and 7 percent selected poverty. This represents a total of 77 percent of the population citing an economic concern as their top priority.
 - Further, when asked if they thought that the shortages of petrol, natural gas, wheat and electricity were serious problems, 77 percent replied yes.
- *Judges*
 - IRI's June poll showed that Pakistanis overwhelmingly supported the reinstatement of the Supreme Court that Musharraf deposed last year, with 83 percent saying that they wanted the court restored and 86 percent saying that it was very important to them.

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- When told that 58 of the 64 judges deposed by Musharraf had been restored and asked if this was enough to satisfy them, 30 percent yes and another 23 percent said maybe, while 38 percent responded no.
- When asked if they preferred focusing on the economy and security or further protests until all of the judges, including the former Chief Justice I.M. Chaudhry, were restored, 60 percent said they preferred the focus on the economy and security, while 31 percent said they preferred protesting until all of the judges were restored.
- *Terrorism*
 - When asked the aforementioned question regarding the issue that was most important to them, suicide bombings were the top concern of 10 percent, up from two percent in June's poll.
 - While a majority of respondents still said they supported a peace deal with the extremists, the number supporting such a deal has dropped 10 points to 54 percent, while the number opposing has risen 17 points to 35 percent.
 - Attitudes towards religious extremism were essentially unchanged from the last poll, with 60 percent saying that it was a serious problem in the country.
 - The October poll saw a six point increase in the number of people who saw the Taliban and Al-Qaeda operating in Pakistan as a serious problem, with 51 percent saying that they were, up from 45 percent in June.
 - Likewise, there was a corresponding increase in the number who said they supported the Pakistan Army fighting the extremists in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), with 38 percent saying yes and 50 percent saying no. This is an increase in support of 11 points over the June poll.
 - The poll saw the strongest support for a specific statement explaining the rationale for military involvement. When asked if they agreed that the Pakistani Army needed to fight foreign extremists because they were planning suicide attacks that would kill Pakistanis, 63 percent said they agreed and 25 percent said they did not.
 - The October poll also witnessed an increase in support for cooperation with the United States in the War on Terror, with 28 percent responding yes, up 13 from the last poll. A majority were still opposed, however, with 63 percent opposing such cooperation, although this was down from 71 percent in June.

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- Despite this increase, Pakistanis remain solidly opposed to U.S. military incursions in the tribal areas, with only 13 percent supporting such incursions and 73 percent opposed. However, when asked if they would support U.S. missile strikes and small raids as long as the Pakistani government was informed first and the attacks were coordinated with the Pakistani Army, 49 percent said yes and 35 percent said no.
- One of the reasons it has proven difficult to build support for military action in the tribal areas has to do with Pakistani attitudes towards Afghanistan. Only 35 percent said that they had a favorable opinion of Afghanistan and only 23 percent had a favorable opinion of Afghan President Hamid Karzai; 54 percent said they felt that the Karzai government was pro-Indian. When asked what they were more concerned about, 54 percent said U.S. military strikes on terror camps in Pakistan as opposed to 23 percent citing terrorists using Pakistan as a base of operations to attack Afghanistan.
- While these numbers are trending towards supporting War on Terror issues, and an easy explanation would cite the Marriott bombing in Islamabad as the cause, the numbers tell a different story. When asked who they felt was responsible for the Marriott Hotel bombing, 50 percent said that they did not know, while 20 percent responded America, 13 percent said the Pakistani government, five percent cited the Taliban and two percent said terrorists. Pakistanis also said that the Marriott bombing was not likely to change their opinion of the Army's fighting in NWFP and FATA, with seven percent saying that it made them more likely to support such action, 24 percent saying less likely, and 42 percent saying that it did not change their opinion at all.
- Previous IRI polling showed that Musharraf's unpopularity was driving down support for the War on Terror, as he was closely associated with this policy. Now that he has exited the political scene, it is likely that these numbers are increasing at least in part due to the fact that he is no longer associated with it.
- Finally, 66 percent agreed that the terrorists were not true Muslims because their actions were forbidden by the Koran.

Leadership Ratings

Pakistani discontent is also taking a toll on the popularity of various political personalities. One of the most striking findings in the October poll was the extent to which voter anger shaded their perceptions of all of the country's leaders. As compared to previous polls, respondents were much more likely to rate leaders unfavorably, across the board. Looking at 14 personalities that were tested in both polls, in the June poll their favorability rating was 43 percent; in October that dropped to 22 percent. Only two personalities received more than 50 percent support, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif; they, along with Shabaz Sharif, were the only three whose favorable rating exceeded their unfavorable rating. Everyone else tested in the October poll had more people rate them unfavorably than favorably.

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- *President Asif Zardari*
 - Among the most significant events to have occurred since IRI's last poll were the resignation of Musharraf and the subsequent election of Asif Zardari to the presidency. IRI's poll found that 32 percent said they supported Zardari's election, while 37 percent were neutral and 30 percent were opposed. With such a large number taking a neutral stance, it appears that the situation is fluid and that President Zardari's performance over the next few months will determine whether they shift to supporting him or not.
 - Respondents in the October poll gave President Zardari an approval rating of 19 percent, while 63 percent said they disapproved of the job he was doing. While these marks are an improvement over the last ratings of Musharraf, they indicate that voter discontent is taking its toll on all government leaders.
 - Like all Pakistani leaders, President Zardari also saw a slide in his favorability rating: 20 percent rated him favorably in October compared to 45 percent in June.
- *Nawaz Sharif*
 - Nawaz Sharif emerged in the June poll as the most popular personality on the Pakistani political landscape. With PPP dominant on the left side of the political spectrum, the right side had until recently been split between Sharif's PML-N and the Musharraf-associated Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q). With the defeat of Musharraf and PML-Q, the center-right vote has coalesced around Sharif, boosting his support. In addition, with the PPP-led government now being held responsible for the problems of the country, Sharif receives an additional boost as he has positioned himself in the opposition. These two factors have broadened his support.
 - Sharif is the most popular living leader in Pakistan, although he, along with everyone else, did see a slide in his image. He received a 60 percent favorable rating in the October poll, down from 82 percent in June.
 - When asked in an open-ended question who they felt was the best person to solve the problems of Pakistan, 31 percent named Sharif, far out-pacing everyone else. The next closest leader named was President Zardari with eight percent.
 - When asked who they would prefer as president, 59 percent supported Sharif while 19 percent selected President Zardari.
- *Pervez Musharraf*
 - When asked if they felt whether Musharraf's resignation was good or bad for the country, 57 percent said it was good for the country and 37 percent said that it was bad.

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- When asked an open-ended question regarding the fate of the former President, voters were split; 22 percent chose forgiveness while 21 percent named some sort of punishment; 59 percent, however, responded that they did not know.

Political Party Ratings

The same dynamic seen in the leadership ratings can be seen in the political party ratings as well. Now that they are the government, PPP is being held responsible for problems besetting the country and are bearing the brunt of voter anger. This has caused a drop in their ratings and, coupled with the center-right vote coalescing behind PML-N, has widened the gap between the two parties.

- As has been the case ever since PML-Q's support collapsed after the February elections, Pakistan now has two dominant parties, one from each side of the political spectrum. When asked who they would vote for if the elections were held next week, 35 percent cited PML-N and 19 percent said PPP, while three percent each supported Pakistan Tahreek-e-Insaf (PTI), PML-Q, and Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), respectively, and one percent each chose Awami National Party (ANP) and Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal/Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Faction (MMA/JUI-F); 16 percent said they did not know.
- While PML-N's 35 percent is more or less unchanged from the June poll, PPP has suffered a large drop in support. In June the party received 32 percent, compared to the 19 percent it received in the current poll, a drop of 13 points.
- Another striking finding in the October poll was the number of respondents who, in response to the open-ended question as to who they support, replied that they would not vote: 18 percent. Indicating a large jump in disaffection, it is likely that growing discontent coupled with a perceived lack of action of the part of the government has manifested into disillusionment and a decision to drop out of the process. Analyzing the demographics of this group reveals that they are in fact former PPP-voters. It is likely that PPP's drop in support is due to this disaffected group moving from PPP and into the will not vote for anybody category.
- Further, when asked who they would vote for if there were elections next year and the PPP government had stabilized the security situation, stopped the price hikes and improved the economy, PPP support rose 13 points to 32 percent, while the number saying that they would not vote at all evaporated to a mere two percent. This scenario also saw PML-N's support decline nine points to 26 percent, while the number of undecided ballooned to 30 percent, up from 16.

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- Looking at the results by province shows PML-N leading Punjab with 54 percent, essentially unchanged from June, while PPP plummeted from 24 percent to eight percent; PML-Q received three percent. PML-N also leads in the NWFP with 23 percent of the vote, PPP is second with 13 percent, ANP received five percent, and PTI was the choice of four percent; MMA/JUI-F received three percent and PML-Q was at two percent. PPP led in Sindh with 42 percent of the vote and in Balochistan with 35 percent.
- With Musharraf gone and PML-Q in the low single digits, the dominant features that framed Pakistani politics for nearly a decade have likewise passed. In its absence, the political debate is reverting to a landscape similar to that of Pakistan in the 1990's.
- When asked who they would vote for if the elections were held next week and the choices were a coalition of secular parties led by PPP and a coalition of religious parties led by PML-N, 38 percent selected the PML-N coalition while 31 percent went with the PPP-led coalition. These numbers are essentially unchanged from the June poll.

Other Findings

- When asked what role they would like Sharia to play as compared to current Pakistani law, 62 percent said more of a role while 14 percent said less of a role.
- Musharraf-era amendments to the constitution strengthened the power of the president to dissolve the national assembly and to appoint judges and Army chiefs. When Pakistanis were asked if President Zardari should retain these powers or give them back to the parliament, 48 percent said the powers should revert to the assembly, while 38 percent felt the president should retain them.
- *The Pakistani Army*
 - The Army had long been the most respected institution in Pakistan. Last year, however, IRI polling showed that the Army's favorable rating was sliding, and follow-up questions revealed that Musharraf's unpopularity and association with the Army was hurting its image. Now that Musharraf has resigned from both the Army and the presidency, the Army's image is rebounding. In the June poll, 68 percent said that they rated the Army favorably, up eight points since the last poll. While this 68 percent rating is not the highest the Army has ever attained, it currently is second only to the media (at 72 percent) in terms of being the most popular institution in the country.
 - When asked if they agreed with the statement that the Army should not play a role in civilian government, voters were split: 49 percent agreed that the Army should not (down from 62 percent in June) while 42 percent disagreed (up from 27 percent).

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- Further, when asked how much control civilian leadership should have over the military, 26 percent replied complete control, 48 percent said some control, and 14 percent replied none. Regarding under what circumstances respondents would support a military takeover of the government, 15 percent said whenever it wants, 56 percent said only in an emergency, and 18 percent replied never.
- There are two trends in the poll that when taken together are revealing. The first involves an increase in both the popularity of the Army and in the number of Pakistanis who believe the Army should play a role in civilian government, 48 percent favoring only some civilian control of the military, and 56 percent open to a military takeover in an emergency. The second involves voter attitudes towards democracy. Whereas last year IRI polls tracked solid pro-democracy sentiment, June's poll is picking up a degree of voters souring on democracy: 67 percent saying that a democratically-elected president and parliament would not make things better in Pakistan and 52 percent saying that country is not making important steps towards democracy.
- As the problems in Pakistan get worse and voter discontent rises, this pessimism is shading their perception of most matters. They are much more likely to dislike any leader, for example. Likewise, it is negatively shading their perception of democracy and the political process, while simultaneously improving the image of the Army and the role voters think it should play. The interplay of these two forces has reasserted itself continually over the course of Pakistan's history, with the military stepping in to take over and solve the problems a failed political process could not.
- Finally, when asked who they felt should control the military, the president or the prime minister, 45 percent said president while 40 percent said prime minister.

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