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Al Jazeera

Pakistanis see US as the Biggest Threat

By: Owen Fay

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A survey commissioned by Al Jazeera in Pakistan has revealed a widespread disenchantment with the United States for interfering with what most people consider internal Pakistani affairs.

The polling was conducted by Gallup Pakistan, an affiliate of the Gallup International polling group, and more than 2,600 people took part.

Interviews were conducted across the political spectrum in all four of the country's provinces, and represented men and women of every economic and ethnic background.

When respondents were asked what they consider to be the biggest threat to the nation of Pakistan, 11 per cent of the population identified the Taliban fighters, who have been blamed for scores of deadly bomb attacks across the country in recent years.

Another 18 per cent said that they believe that the greatest threat came from neighbouring India, which has fought three wars with Pakistan since partition in 1947.

But an overwhelming number, 59 per cent of respondents, said the greatest threat to Pakistan right now is, in fact, the US, a donor of considerable amounts of military and development aid.

Tackling the Taliban

The resentment was made clearer when residents were asked about the Pakistan's military efforts to tackle the Taliban.

Keeping with recent trends a growing number of people, now 41 per cent, supported the campaign.

About 24 per cent of people remained opposed, while another 22 per cent of Pakistanis remained neutral on the question.

A recent offensive against Taliban fighters in the Swat, Lower Dir and Buner districts of North West Frontier Province killed at least 1,400 fighters, according to the military, but also devastated the area and forced two million to leave their homes.

The military has declared the operation a success, however, some analysts have suggested that many Taliban fighters simply slipped away to other areas, surviving to fight another day.

When people were asked if they would support government-sanctioned dialogue with Taliban fighters if it were a viable option the numbers change significantly.

Although the same 41 per cent said they would still support the military offensive, the number of those supporting dialogue leaps up to 43 per cent.

So clearly, Pakistanis are, right now, fairly evenly split on how to deal with the Taliban threat.

Drone anger

However, when asked if they support or oppose the US military's drone attacks against what Washington claims are Taliban and al-Qaeda targets, only nine per cent of respondents reacted favourably.

A massive 67 per cent say they oppose US military operations on Pakistani soil.

This is a fact that the hatred against the US is growing very quickly, mainly because of these drone attacks," Makhdoom Babar, the editor-in-chief of Pakistan's *The Daily Mail* newspaper, said.

"Maybe the intelligence channels, the military channels consider it productive, but for the general public it is controversial ... the drone attacks are causing collateral damage," he told Al Jazeera.

A senior US official told Al Jazeera he was not surprised by the poll's findings.

The US has a considerable amount of work to do to make itself better understood to the Muslim world, he said.

And it would take not only educational and economic work to win over the Pakistani people but also a concerted effort to help the Pakistani government deal with "extremist elements" that are trying to disrupt security within Pakistan, he added.

Nearly 500 people, mostly suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters, are believed to have been killed in about 50 US drone attacks since August last year, according to intelligence agents, local government officials and witnesses.

Washington refuses to confirm the raids, but the US military in neighbouring Afghanistan and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are the only forces operating in the area that are

known to have the technology.

The government in Islamabad formally opposes the attacks saying that they violate Pakistani sovereignty and cause civilian casualties which turn public opinion against efforts to battle the Taliban.

Lieutenant-General Hamid Nawaz Khan, a former caretaker interior minister of Pakistan, told Al Jazeera that US pressure on Pakistan to take on the Taliban was one reason for the backlash.

"Americans have forced us to fight this 'war on terror'... whatever Americans wanted they have been able to get because this government was too weak to resist any of the American vultures and they have been actually committing themselves on the side of America much more than what even [former president] Pervez Musharraf did," he said.

Pakistani leadership

The consensus of opinion in opposition to US military involvement in Pakistan is notable given the fact that on a raft of internal issues there is a clear level of disagreement, something which would be expected in a country of this size.

When asked for their opinions on Asif Ali Zardari, the current Pakistani president, 42 per cent of respondents said they believed he was doing a bad job. Around 11 per cent approved of his leadership, and another 34 per cent had no strong opinion either way.

That pattern was reflected in a question about Zardari's Pakistan People's party (PPP).

Respondents were asked if they thought the PPP was good or bad for the country.

About 38 per cent said the PPP was bad for the country, 20 per cent believed it was good for the country and another 30 per cent said they had no strong opinion.

Respondents were even more fractured when asked for their views on how the country should be led.

By far, the largest percentage would opt for Nawaz Sharif, a former prime minister and leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) party, as leader. At least 38 per cent backed him to run Pakistan.

Last month, the Pakistani supreme court quashed Sharif's conviction on charges of hijacking, opening the way for him to run for political office again.

Zardari 'unpopular'

Zardari, the widower of assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, received only nine per cent support, while Reza Gilani, Pakistan's prime minister, had the backing of 13 per cent.

But from there, opinions vary greatly. Eight per cent of the population would support a military government, 11 per cent back a political coalition of the PPP and the PML-N party.

Another six per cent would throw their support behind religious parties and the remaining 15 per cent would either back smaller groups or simply do not have an opinion.

Babar told Al Jazeera that Zardari's unpopularity was understandable given the challenges that the country had faced since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US.

"Any president in Pakistan would be having the same popularity that President Zardari is having, because under this situation the president of Pakistan has to take a lot of unpopular decisions," he said.

"He is in no position to not take unpopular decisions that are actually in the wider interests of the country, but for common people these are very unpopular decisions."