

More Afghans optimistic about future despite U.S. disillusionment

By Matthew Rusling

WASHINGTON, Oct. 29 (Xinhua) -- Some 42 percent of Afghans were optimistic about the country's trajectory, a rise from last year's 38 percent, said a new survey funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Some 29 percent of those surveyed felt the country was moving in the wrong direction, while 21 percent had mixed feelings.

Those findings are at odds with a growing consensus in Washington, which regards the situation in the beleaguered country as fragile.

Farishta Sakhi, an Afghan national and board member of WASSA, an organization in Western Afghanistan, said the study accurately reflected how Afghans are thinking about their country.

The view in Washington, she said, could be influenced by the number of coalition troops killed in action in Afghanistan, a number which now stands at more than 400 this year, an all-time high.

Afghans also viewed themselves through the prism of history, as war had been raging for decades in Afghanistan, and the country had been through much worse than it was going through now, she explained.

"You have to understand that (we had) 30 years of bloody war, and nothing was working," she said.

"The situation zigzags. Sometimes it is good, and sometimes it is bad," Sakhi added.

Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst at the Washington-based CATO Institute, said Afghans had a higher threshold for violence and corruption than many Americans, a factor that may explain their optimism.

Americans, for example, would be on edge in a neighborhood that saw one shooting each month. However, Afghans, bedeviled by years of war, might regard the area as safe.

The Taliban has regained momentum, and the August elections were tainted by massive fraud and misconduct.

Many doubt the United States can build an economy in a rural country that boasts almost no infrastructure. Others argue that the U.S.-backed governing structure -- which concentrates power in the capital Kabul -- was alien to a country traditionally ruled by tribes and warlords.

An Afghan expert at the U.S. State Department, Matthew Hoh, made

headlines this week after resigning on the grounds that the war was not worth the effort. A number of experts are jumping on the bandwagon by claiming that the conflict was not in the interest of the United States.

Afghan opinion is not often heard in the United States, as there are few Afghan lobbying groups in Washington, Sakhi observed.

The 2009 survey was conducted by the Asia Foundation, with all interviews completed in person by 648 Afghan men and women employed by the Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research in Kabul.

The report came as U.S. President Barack Obama is deciding whether to deploy 40,000 new troops in this eighth year of U.S. occupation of Afghanistan.

According to the survey, 29 percent of Afghans felt the country was moving in the wrong direction -- a significant rise from 11 percent in 2004, but down from 32 percent last year.

In 2004, the survey polled just 804 Afghans, whereas all studies since have polled more than 6,000 Afghans.

The study was conducted in the months prior to the August elections and reflects heightened expectations in June and July. The answers may differ if the same poll were taken today, Innocent cautioned, as the August election was tainted by massive fraud and allegations of ballot stuffing.

Nearly one in five ballots had to be thrown out, casting a shadow of suspicion over incumbent Afghan President Hamid Karzai -- who is expected to clinch the November runoff -- and discrediting him in the eyes of many Afghans.

A tendency toward siding with the winner could be another factor influencing the study's results, as Afghans recognize that the current instability would be exacerbated if U.S. forces pack up and leave, Innocent added.

The poll found 71 percent of Afghans viewed the national government in a positive light -- despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary -- although that figure had fallen from 80 percent in 2007 and was 59 percent in the war-torn Southwest.

As for whether respondents' answers were colored by fear of repercussions, Sunil Pillai, program officer in Afghanistan for the Asia Foundation, said the organization mitigated those issues by using locals to conduct the interviews.

Support for democracy dropped to 78 percent this year, down from 84 percent in 2006, although those figures were still high.

Afghans' optimism may also reflect the perception that the United States has finally taken notice of its plight after years of distraction in Iraq.

Zoran Milovic, a deputy country representative in Afghanistan for the Asia Foundation, remarked: "For many people, the reason for real hope is that the U.S. is paying attention and putting resources on the table."

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