



Afghan Futures: A National Public Opinion Survey

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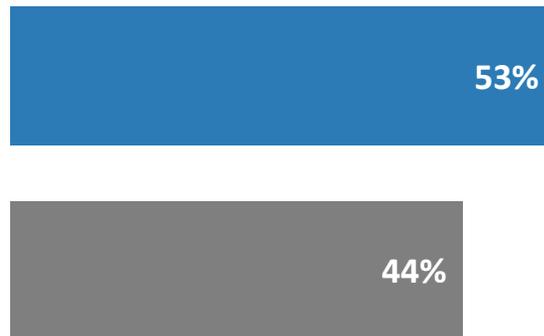
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Afghans Broadly Support New Government, Setting Aside Suspicions of Election Fraud

Afghans overwhelmingly support the outcome of their country's disputed 2014 election, rallying behind its new leadership and expressing broad optimism for the future despite doubts about the election process and recognition of the challenges ahead.

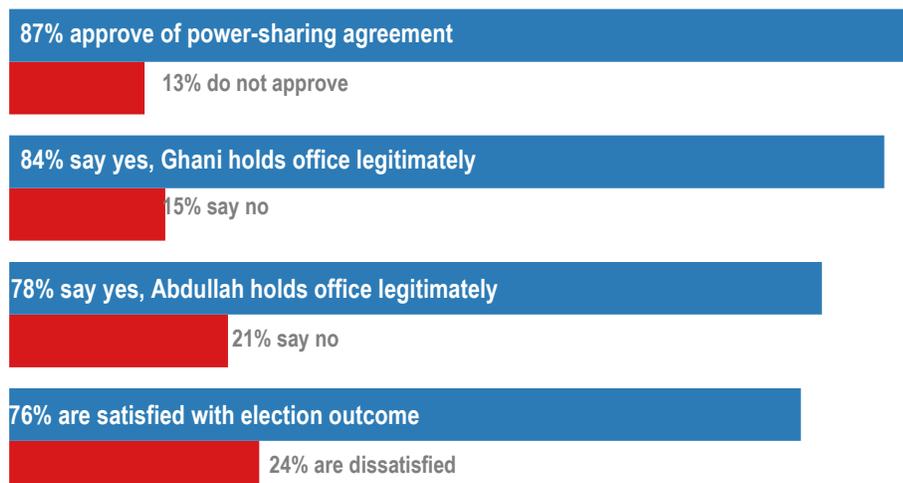
Seen as a critical step on the country's path to greater self-sufficiency, the election in one sense fell short: Just 44 percent of those surveyed by the Afghan Center for Socio-economic and Opinion Research say it was fair and transparent, while 53 percent see it as fraudulent.

More than half say the runoff election was **mostly fraudulent**, while **44%** believe it was mostly fair and transparent.



Nonetheless, the ultimate power-sharing agreement has achieved broad acceptance. Eighty-seven percent approve of the deal in which Ashraf Ghani assumed the presidency while runner-up Abdullah Abdullah took on the newly created role of chief executive. Each is seen as legitimately holding his office, by 84 and 78 percent, respectively. And 76 percent of Afghans say they're satisfied with the outcome, even if far fewer are highly satisfied.

Most Afghans express positive views about the outcome of the 2014 presidential election.



Notably, even among those who see the Ghani-Abdullah runoff election as fraudulent, 84 percent approve of the power-sharing arrangement, indicating a willingness to tolerate improvised measures in search of stability in their battle-scarred nation.

These and other attitudes were assessed in the latest Afghan Futures survey, an ongoing public interest poll in Afghanistan sponsored by ACSOR, the longest-established survey research company in the country, with analysis by Langer Research Associates of New York, N.Y.

Other results in the national survey mark the country's difficulties, but also find improvements in living conditions in the last few years and substantial optimism for the future. One potential reason is that, unlike other recently released data, this survey was conducted after the resolution of the disputed presidential election and the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement between Afghanistan and the United States. Both may have brightened the public mood, despite continued difficulties in terms of development and security alike.

Among its results, the survey finds a positive impact of civil society organizations in the country, a sector expected to gain in importance as military intervention wanes. Fifty-four percent of Afghans say CSOs currently are active in their areas. Where they do operate, many say these organizations are making things in the country better, particularly in terms of improving education, supporting women's rights, reducing corruption and expanding access to health services.

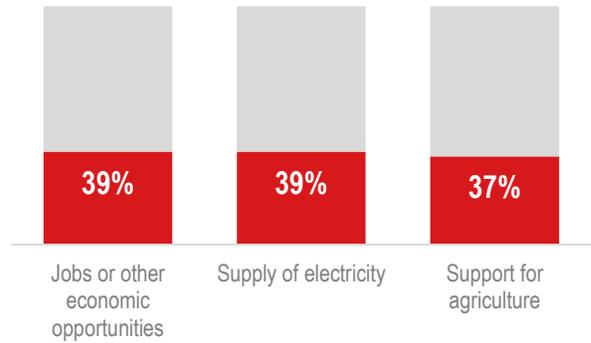
In a further, especially positive result for the development of civil society, 80 percent say they're confident that a system of freely electing leaders can work in Afghanistan. That's despite the challenges of recent elections, including persistent public perceptions of election fraud.

80% of Afghans are confident in a system of freely voting for leaders.



That said, basic services and unemployment remain persistent problems. Just four in 10 give positive ratings to the availability of jobs or other economic opportunities in their area. Ratings of other fundamentals – the supply of electricity and support for agriculture – also continue to be weak. And complaints about corruption among local officials, the police and in the national government remain extremely widespread.

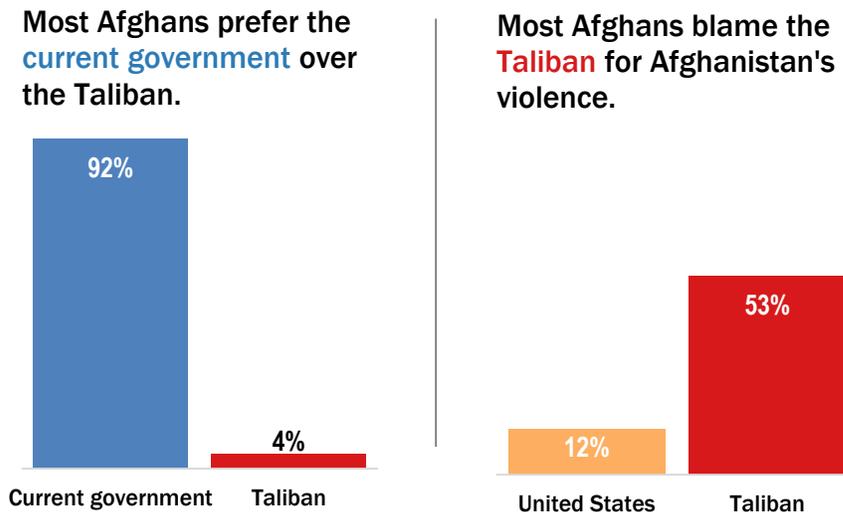
Well fewer than half rate the following positively.



Among other results of the national, random-sample, face-to-face survey:

A record 92 percent of Afghans prefer the current government over the Taliban, a sentiment that’s been very widely held (by 82 to 92 percent) in nearly a decade of polling. And the public by a wide 62-36 percent rejects the notion that the Taliban has become more moderate.

Seventy-seven percent support the presence of U.S. forces; 67 percent say the same of NATO/ISAF forces more generally. Despite the country’s travails, eight in 10 say it was a good thing for the United States to oust the Taliban in 2001. And many more blame either the Taliban or al Qaeda for the country’s violence, 53 percent, than blame the United States, 12 percent. The latter is about half what it was in 2012, coinciding with a sharp reduction in the U.S. deployment.



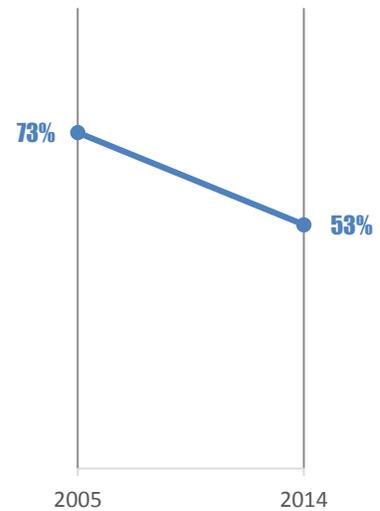
Two-thirds favor a major ISAF role in training Afghan forces in the future. Indeed a plurality, 46 percent, would like to see a greater commitment of U.S. forces after this year than currently is planned. (Of the rest, a quarter supports the planned drawdown and 29 percent prefer fewer or no U.S. forces to remain.) There's wide regional variability in support for more U.S. forces – 62 percent in the West and 52 percent in the North, compared with a low of 27 percent in the Southwest, the Taliban's prime stronghold.

In a particularly troubling result, the number of Afghans who see the cultivation of opium poppy as “unacceptable in all circumstances” has fallen to 53 percent – the lowest on record, and sharply down from a peak of 73 percent in an ABC News poll with field work by ACSOR in 2005. The result corresponds with record-high opium cultivation and production, as reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

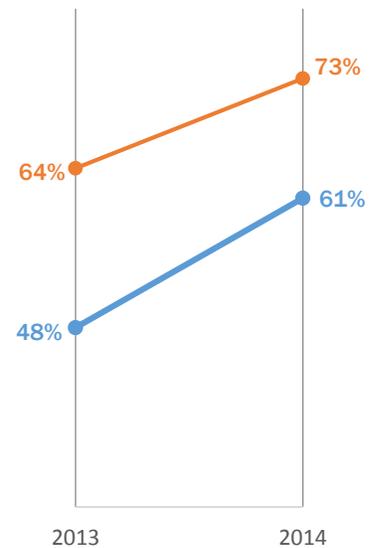
Other findings indicate resilience. Sixty-one percent say the country is headed in the right direction, up from 48 percent in 2013, again possibly indicating relief at the peaceful conclusion of the presidential election, as well as gains in some basic living conditions. Indeed, despite economic deprivation and poor infrastructure in many locales, 73 percent rate their overall living conditions positively – up by 9 percentage points from 2013 – and 76 percent expect improvement in the year ahead. Sixty-two percent expect the new government to make progress against corruption, and nearly six in 10 expect better security and a greater ability in the next year to afford things they want and need.

A risk, of course, is that these expectations may go unmet, with the potential for backlash if so. At the same time, the hopes for a better future expressed by many Afghans indicate a significant willingness to stay the course, even given the country's troubled path to date.

The percentage of Afghans who see the cultivation of opium poppy as "unacceptable in all cases" has declined since 2005.



Afghans share a growing sense of optimism following the election. More rate their overall living conditions positively and say Afghanistan is heading in the right direction.



Additional details on these and other topics are summarized below. Further results are available from ACSOR or its U.S. partner company, D3 Systems, Inc., of McLean, Va.

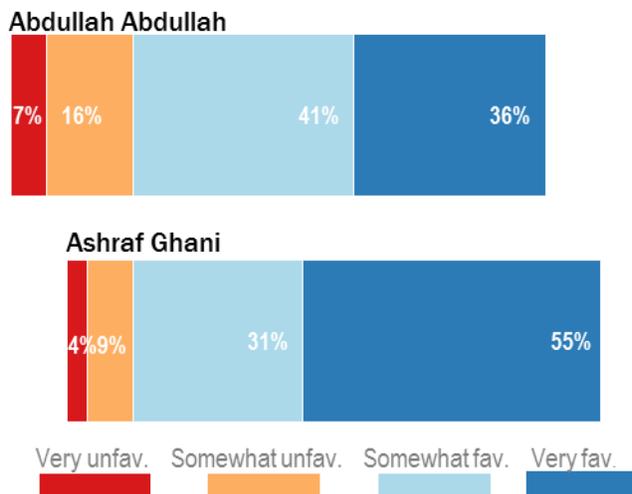
Political Leadership

As was the case in ACSOR’s pre-election polling, large majorities express favorable opinions of Ghani and Abdullah alike, now 87 and 76 percent, respectively. Similarly large majorities also see each as legitimately holding his office and express confidence in each to unite the country. In a hopeful sign for continued accommodation, 78 percent believe the two can successfully maintain their power-sharing arrangement.

Ghani, however, is the stronger figure in some measures. Fifty-five percent see him “very” favorably and 56 percent express strong confidence that he can unite the country politically; the corresponding numbers for Abdullah fall to 36 and 34 percent, respectively. Further, if their current arrangement were to come apart, the public by a broad margin, 66 vs. 21 percent, thinks Ghani would prevail as the country’s leader.

Ghani’s support exceeds Abdullah’s especially in the country’s South and East, reflecting Ghani’s Pashtun roots. At the same time, his “strong” support is higher than Abdullah’s across all regions, save Kabul.

Although Afghans see both Abdullah and Ghani as legitimately holding their offices, they are more likely to have **very favorable** opinions of Ghani.



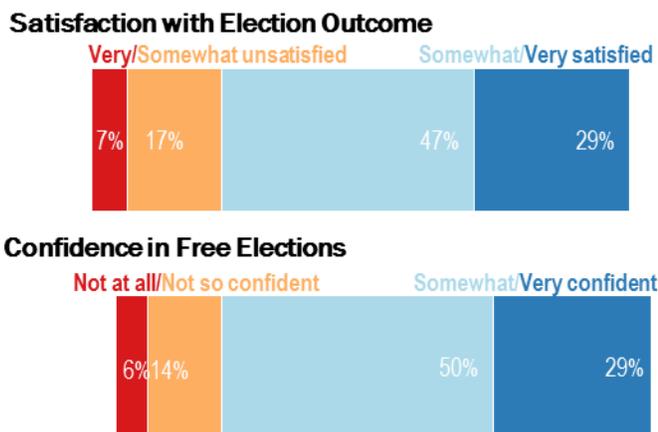
Notably, 78 percent of those who say they voted for Abdullah see Ghani as the country's legitimate president, and 76 percent of Ghani voters feel that Abdullah legitimately holds his office. At least eight in 10 voters on both sides also think the two will be able to maintain their power-sharing arrangement, as do seven in 10 or more across regions and ethnic groups.

Also, there's no majority consensus on who benefitted most from perceived fraud. Thirty-eight percent say Ghani mainly benefitted, vs. 27 percent for Abdullah; an additional 21 percent say both took equal advantage. The fractured result could be one reason the public seems willing to set this concern aside.

Remarkably, even among Afghans who see the election as fraudulent, 67 percent say they're satisfied with the outcome and 74 percent think a system of freely electing leaders can work in Afghanistan. The numbers are similar among Abdullah voters, despite their candidate's inability to claim the top job.

Still, there are limits to the public's acceptance of the election process: Seventy-six percent say they're at least somewhat satisfied with the outcome, but far fewer, 29 percent, are very satisfied with it. And while, as noted, 80 percent are confident that a system of freely electing leaders can work in Afghanistan, far fewer, 29 percent, are very confident of that. The latter result suggests that full-throated public support for democracy remains a work in progress.

Although majorities are satisfied with the election outcome and have confidence in free elections, few are **very satisfied/confident**.



Current Conditions and the Country's Direction

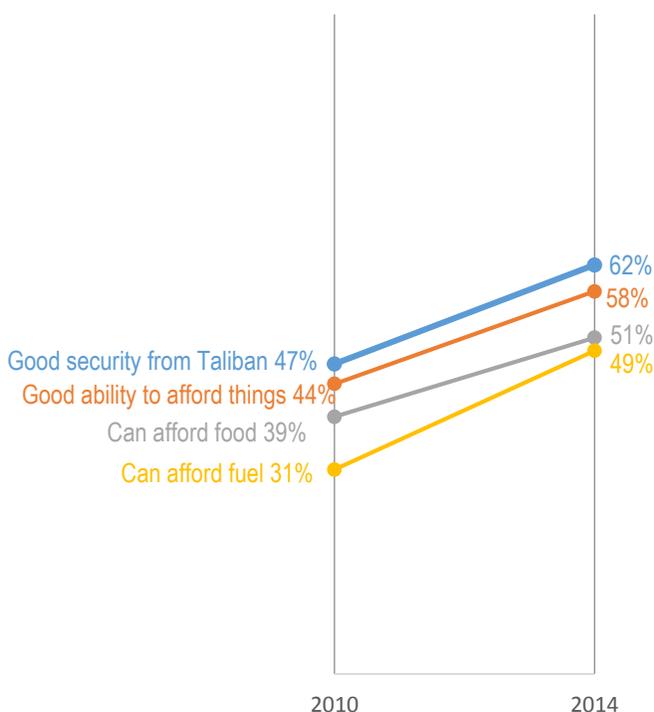
As noted, there's been a sizable increase since fall 2013 in the number of Afghans who say their country's going in the right direction, up by 13 points to 61 percent. More, 73 percent, rate their overall living conditions as very or somewhat good, and this too is up, by nine points. Many expect local conditions to improve further in the year ahead.

Crucially in terms of basic conditions, positive ratings of the ability "to afford things you want and need" are up by 14 points, to 58 percent, and ratings specifically of the affordability of food and fuel are up from their levels in 2010, by 12 and 18 points, respectively. The availability of medical care is rated positively by 56 percent, essentially unchanged.

Underlying weaknesses remain. Just half say they can afford all the food and fuel they need, even with the improvements on these measures. Only 39 percent rate the availability of jobs and economic opportunity and the supply of electricity positively. Just about a third positively rates either the national economy or their personal finances.

For all the country's economic difficulties, the prevalence of some consumer products has risen sharply. A new high of 72 percent of Afghans report having a mobile phone, up sharply from 59 percent just since 2010 and from only 31 percent in 2005. Fifty-seven percent say they have a television; 21 percent, a satellite dish; and 42 percent, a motorbike, all new highs. Still, just 19 percent of Afghans have a refrigerator and only 6 percent report having internet access.

Compared with four years ago, Afghans are more likely to say they can afford fuel and food and rate their ability to afford things and security from the Taliban positively.



Accommodation with the Taliban

The Taliban are vastly unpopular; just 4 percent prefer the group to the current government. Yet tolerance, while still comparatively slight, has risen; 21 percent now say they support the presence of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan, double the number who said so in 2010. And still more, 31 percent, say they support the presence of foreign jihadi fighters, up by 14 points in the same time period.

Also comparing to 2010, perceived security from the Taliban and other armed groups is up by 15 points; while the reasons aren't entirely clear, this may reflect a changed dynamic as ISAF forces have withdrawn and the Taliban have consolidated their hold on some areas. Indeed, reported security from the Taliban has increased especially sharply in some of the areas where they've gained greater control, the East and South Central regions.

Those results compare with a much broader 77 percent support for the presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, also up from 2010, by 15 points. Taken together, the trend lines indicate that, perhaps understandably, some Afghans' priority may not be whose flag flies over their village, but the extent of security they feel.

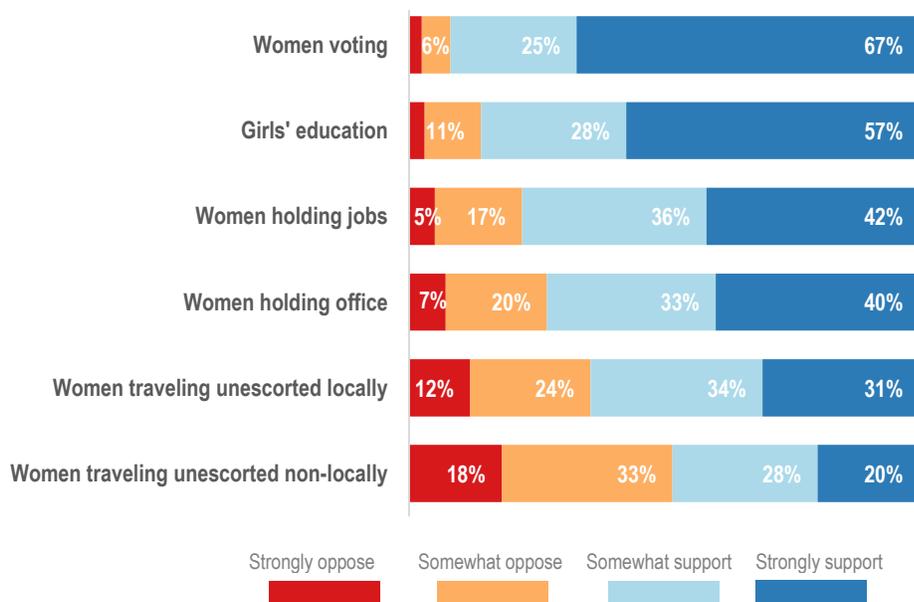
Indeed, 71 percent of Afghans would like to see the government negotiate a settlement with the Taliban rather than continue fighting. Six in 10 express willingness for Taliban members to join Afghan security forces if they lay down their arms. As many, though, say they're unwilling to cede control of some provinces to the Taliban in a peace deal.

In a result that's challenging to Western sensibilities, substantial numbers say they would accept circumscribed women's rights in exchange for a settlement with the Taliban. Sixty-five percent would accept restrictions on women leaving the home unescorted; half or nearly half say they would accept bans on women working, holding political office, attending school and voting. Men and women express these views in essentially equal numbers.

Women's Rights

Willingness to cede women's rights in an agreement with the Taliban seems to indicate the extent of war-weariness in the country. Absent the possibility of deal-making with the Taliban, many Afghans express support for these rights. Chief among them, 92 percent support women voting, and two-thirds say they feel that way strongly. Eighty-five percent support girls' education, 57 percent strongly. Eighty-five percent support girls' education, 57 percent strongly.

Although substantial numbers of Afghans express support for women's rights, support is highest for women voting and girls' education compared with women holding jobs and traveling freely.



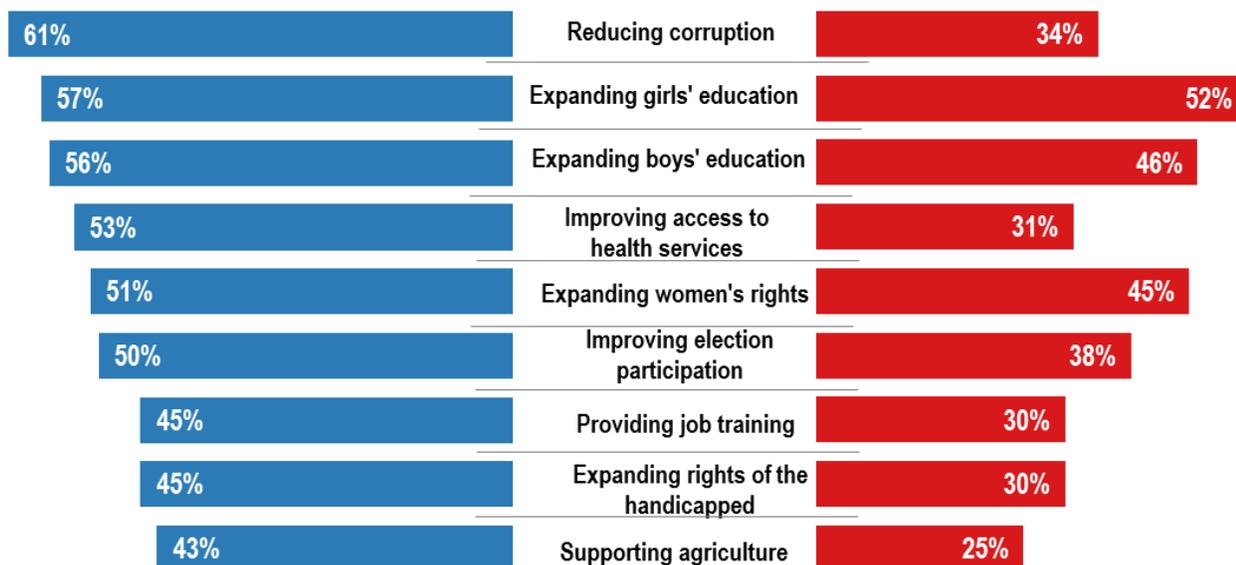
About three-quarters also support women holding jobs or government positions, and about two-thirds support women leaving their home unescorted within their own area. But just four in 10 support the first two strongly, falling to three in 10 for the latter, and fewer support women traveling unescorted outside their local area.

Generally, support for women's rights is highest among urban women, followed by urban men, then by rural women, and sharply lower, in most cases, among rural men. Three-quarters of the country's population lives in rural areas.

Activities and Effectiveness of CSOs

Civil society organizations are seen as effective by substantial numbers of Afghans, particularly where those organizations are active, and therefore have developed a positive reputation. Most strikingly, among the 54 percent who say CSOs are active in their area, 61 percent see such organizations as effective at combatting official corruption in the country. Where CSOs are not active, far fewer, 34 percent, see them as helping reduce corruption; many instead have no opinion.

Afghans who say CSOs are active in their area are more likely to believe CSOs make a difference in their community than those who are unaware of CSOs in their area.



In locales in which they operate, 57 and 56 percent, respectively, credit CSOs with improving girls' and boys' education, and 53 percent say they've boosted health services. Anywhere from 51 to 43 percent see evidence of CSOs making strides on other issues where they are active, including women's rights, participation in elections, job training, promoting the rights of the handicapped and supporting agriculture.

Seventy-six percent say United Nations funding for CSOs is a good thing; fewer, but still 57 percent, endorse funding of CSOs by the United States and European Union countries alike.

Opium

Fifteen percent of Afghans see the cultivation of poppies for opium as acceptable in all cases – a small number, but a new high in polling back to 2005. As noted, just 53 percent call it unacceptable in all cases, down 20 points in nearly the last decade to a new low. The rest, 32 percent, call it acceptable if there's no other way to earn a living.

Acceptance of growing poppies is highest by far in the country's main poppy-growing regions, the West and Southwest, as well as in the central Hazarjat region and in the East. Majorities in these areas – 78, 76, 62 and 54 percent, respectively – see cultivating opium poppies as acceptable, either in all cases or if there's no alternative. That represents another serious challenge for Afghanistan, and the international community alike, in the years ahead.

Methodology

The ongoing Afghan Futures surveys have been sponsored as a public service since 2010 by the Afghan Center for Socio-Economic and Opinion Research to track the course of public attitudes in Afghanistan. These results are based on face-to-face interviews conducted by ACSOR Nov. 4-12, 2014, among a random national sample of 2,051 Afghans age 18 and older. Interviews were conducted in Dari and Pashto in all 34 of the country's provinces. Of the 420 potential primary sampling units in the country, 81 were inaccessible for security or transportation reasons and 89 were inaccessible to female interviewers, resulting in non-coverage of 11 percent of Afghan men, 25 percent of women, and 18 percent of the population overall. Including design effects, results have a margin of sampling error of +/- 2.5 points for the full sample. Sampling, field work oversight and data tabulation were produced by D3 Systems of McLean, Va.

Visit [ACSOR's website](#) for the full survey questionnaire, overall results to each question and a more detailed description of the survey methodology.

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