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Poll finds Pakistanis favor talks with militants

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ISLAMABAD, [Pakistan](#) (AP) -- Pakistanis favor negotiating with Taliban militants rather than fighting them and hold their U.S. allies in the war on terror most responsible for violence in the country, according to a poll released Friday.

The results show strong public support for the new government's policy of seeking peace with the militants, despite U.S. concerns that a letup in military pressure will allow the Taliban and al-Qaida to operate freely in the lawless tribal regions along the Afghan border.

The poll by the Washington-based group Terror Free Tomorrow also shows that three-quarters of respondents want U.S.-backed President Pervez Musharraf to resign or be impeached and that the popularity of his chief critic, Nawaz Sharif, is soaring.

The poll surveyed 1,306 adult Pakistanis in face-to-face interviews in rural and urban areas across the country between May 25 and June 1. It had a 3 percent margin of error.

While Musharraf relied more on force in dealing with the militants, the coalition government elected in February has chosen to negotiate with the Taliban through tribal elders. It denies talking with terrorists and says any deal will force out foreign fighters.

The poll found 58 percent of respondents support talks with the Pakistani Taliban, while 19 percent want the government to fight them. About 50 percent wanted talks with al-Qaida.

The poll also reveals pervasive anti-U.S. sentiment here nearly seven years after Musharraf made Pakistan a front-line ally of Washington's war on terror.

Although there are no U.S. combat forces based here, 52 percent of Pakistanis hold the United States most responsible for the violence in the country, compared with just 8 percent who blame al-Qaida and 4 percent who blame the Pakistani Taliban.

Some 73 percent say the real purpose of the war on terror is to weaken the Muslim world and dominate Pakistan.

Only 12 percent say they would support unilateral action against Taliban and al-Qaida militants in Pakistan by the U.S. military, which has more than 30,000 troops in neighboring [Afghanistan](#).

The poll was taken before a U.S. air strike last week killed 11 Pakistani border troops, likely deepening anti-American sentiment.

Osama bin Laden's approval rating spiked to 34 percent from 24 percent in January, according to the poll. But that was still below the 46 percent the al-Qaida leader garnered last August.

However, most Pakistanis generally view extremists and their leaders negatively, with only 19 percent of respondents approving of top Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud and 62 percent opposing the presence of Arab and Uzbek al-Qaida fighters in the country.

The poll also reaffirmed Musharraf's political difficulties, with the former army leader registering a 73 percent unfavorable rating. Following elections won by his critics, Musharraf has taken a back seat in politics, but has resisted pressure to resign.

Sharif _ a former prime minister and Musharraf's top critic _ emerged as the most popular politician, with 86 percent approval, up from 74 percent in January. His party, which is demanding Musharraf's impeachment, would emerge as the clear winner in a national election with 42 percent support, according to the poll.

Sharif's party shares power in a shaky coalition with the larger Pakistan People's Party of slain ex-premier Benazir Bhutto. That party would get only 32 percent support, according to the poll.

In a sign that a key issue that undermined Musharraf remains dear to Pakistanis, the poll found that 93 percent think it is important to have an independent judiciary.

But there is also widespread discontent over the high cost of food and fuel, amid double digit inflation and shortages of staple commodities. Some 86 percent said they faced increasing difficulty getting flour for daily consumption, primarily because of high prices.

Terror Free Tomorrow, a not-for-profit group, investigates why people support or oppose extremism. The poll was co-sponsored by the New America Foundation, a policy institute with prominent current and former journalists on its board.