



Gallup Pakistan History Project's Weekend Read 36:

Gun control in Pakistan: Public Opinion Analysis from Gallup Pakistan History Project Polls Data by Abdullah Waqar Tajwar, Research Executive at Gallup Pakistan

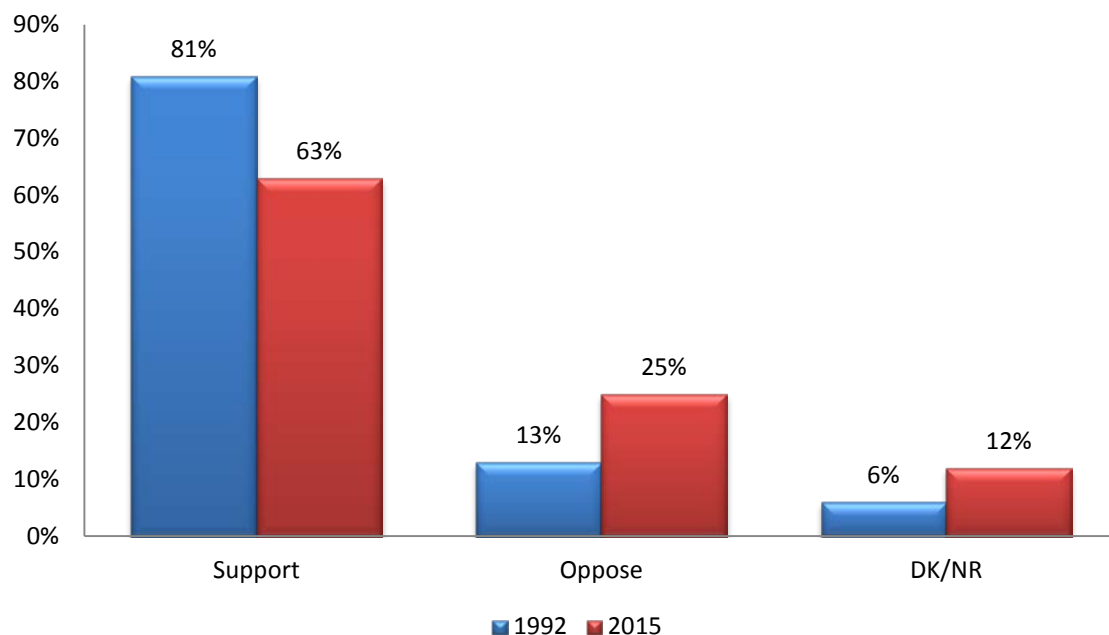
*Abstract: The conclusions and interpretations presented in this article are predicated on the **empirical findings of a survey carried out by Gallup Pakistan in the year 1992 and again in 2015** with the intent of gauging public opinion on the issue of gun control in Pakistan. A representative sample of the Pakistani public was asked the following question: "Suppose the government orders that all unlicensed arms and weapons should be returned to the government otherwise strict action would be taken against them. Some people would support this step while others would oppose it. Would you support this policy or oppose it?" In 1992, 81% Pakistanis said that they supported this order while 13% said they opposed it. In 2015, the question was modified slightly to gauge public opinions about any potential order that might call for returning unlicensed weapons and arms. In response, 63% Pakistanis said that they would support such an order if it was announced while 25% said they would oppose it.*

This article will attempt to analyse public opinion on the broader question of gun-control within Pakistan and attempt to find plausible explanations for the statistics that have been provided on this issue by Gallup Pakistan History Project. The link between violence and firearms, both conventional and otherwise, is one that has been well documented, particularly with regards to a number of African states which have been embroiled in civil wars and revolutions over the preceding years and decades. However, it is worth exploring whether Pakistanis also view firearms solely as destructive tools of war and violence or is there more to this relationship than meets the eye. On the face of it, it seems that there is. In Pakistan, the question of the role that guns play in the everyday acts of crime, violence and terrorism is one that has not really found center stage as yet. However, it is one that needs to become a focus of policy makers if Pakistan truly wishes to become a state that is defined by peace and rule of law in the near future.

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On the issue of firearms within Pakistan, Gallup Pakistan asked a representative sample of the Pakistani public the following specific question: **“Suppose the government orders that all unlicensed arms and weapons should be returned to the government otherwise strict action would be taken against them. Some people would support this step while others would oppose it. Would you support this policy or oppose it?”** The results of this survey, both in the year 1992 and in 2015, are presented together in a table below so as to compare the changes in public opinion that have taken place on this question over the course of twenty odd years.



Source: Gallup Pakistan National Survey (covering 4 provinces and Urban/Rural areas)

The results, as can be observed from the figure above, clearly show a substantial decrease in the proportion of Pakistanis supporting a policy of returning all unlicensed firearms to the government. This segment of the Pakistani **public that would have been in support of any such**

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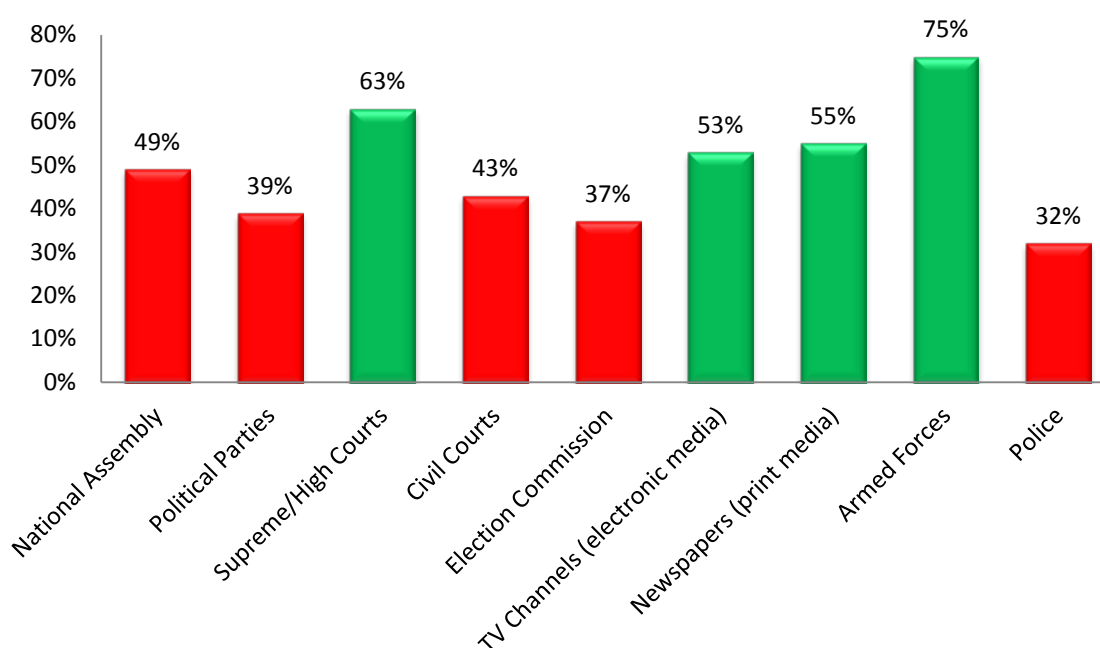
step or initiative taken by the government against unlicensed weapons stood at an overwhelming 81 percent of the public in the year 1992 but fell down to 63 percent in 2015; a significant decrease of 18 percentage points over the course of 23 years. Although it can still be reasoned that despite a decreasing trend over the years, an absolute majority of Pakistanis (i.e. greater than fifty percent) are nevertheless still in support of the government if it enacts any such policy against firearms. However, this should not diminish the importance of the fact that despite an increasingly worsening security situation in the country in the time period between 1992 and 2015, the proportion of Pakistanis in favour of any policy curbing illegal firearms in the Country has still fallen. Additionally, in the course of this time period, the segment of the Pakistani public that was opposed to the enactment of any such law or policy requiring citizens to relinquish their illegal firearms to the government actually rose from just 13 percent of the public in 1992 to 25 percent of the public in 2015.

This article will therefore focus on trying to understand the causes behind this apparent decrease in the proportion of Pakistanis supporting anti-gun laws and a subsequent increase in the percentage of the public opposing such laws. This will be followed by an analysis on the potential consequences for Pakistan in the event that such a policy curbing firearms within the Country is unable to see the light of day. A plausible explanation for this trend in public opinion on the issue of gun control can be sought by viewing this survey question in the broader context of public trust in government and state institutions, particularly the ones responsible for maintaining security, peace and law and order in Pakistan.

The state institution primarily tasked with maintaining peace and security for everyone within the borders of a country is the institution of the Police. However, in Pakistan, this particular state institution is often seen as an agent of the ruling elite instead of being viewed as a protector of the people. As unfortunate as it may sound, the above mentioned view about the police in Pakistan is not really an exaggeration. The recent incident of child sexual abuse in Kasur, a city just a couple of miles away from Lahore, further dented the credibility of the police and brought forth the sheer scale of corruption and malpractice inherent within the institution. Empirical evidence of this trust deficit in the police is available in a publication of the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) titled: **‘Public Opinion on Quality of Democracy in Pakistan: At the end of the Second Year of Federal and Provincial**

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Governments June 2014 – May 2015’. Within the report, in the ‘Trust in Institutions’ section, the institution that had the worst public approval rating was the police. **In 2015, only 32 percent of the Pakistani public expressed ‘somewhat’ to ‘a lot’ of trust in the police.** Other institutions that were also rated by the public in this section were the National Assembly, Political Parties, Supreme/High Courts, Civil Courts, Election Commission, TV Channels, Newspapers and Armed Forces. A table has been added below to compare between positive approval rating scores given by the public to each institution stated above.



PILDAT Report on Public Opinion on Quality of Democracy in Pakistan At the end of Second Year of Federal and Provincial Governments: June 2014 – May 2015

It is undoubtedly telling that the police had the worst approval rating out of all of the above institutions. Even political parties and the election commission were given a higher approval rating by the public. This decrease in support of the public for anti-gun laws therefore has its roots in the overwhelming distrust that Pakistanis have for the police. If a country’s foremost institution of providing security and safety to the citizens of that country is the very institution that is feared and distrusted by an outright majority of the citizens, then it becomes

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progressively harder to find fault with the people who wish to keep a weapon in their possession, illegal or otherwise, in case they have to protect themselves. That is because the state has clearly failed to protect its people while successive democratic governments of Pakistan have all been guilty of interfering within the police, using police officials more as their personal body guards instead of enforcers of the law. These malpractices that are inherent within the Pakistan Police can therefore be seen as a significant factor in shaping public opinion on the issue of gun control. That is because the police have developed a reputation of failing to protect the rights and lives of Pakistani citizens without discriminating on the basis of religion, ethnicity or social status. This poor reputation has therefore made people apprehensive of handing over their firearms to the police, possibly also out of the fear that those same weapons are going to be pointed at them rather than at criminals and/or terrorists.

In the intervening years between these two surveys, apart from distrust of the police, there has also been a growing concern among the Pakistani masses over the overall security situation of the country. Ever since Pakistan's foray into the ill-fated 'War on Terror', terrorism has become nothing short of a menace within the country. A menace that has claimed innocent Pakistani lives numbering well in the thousands up till now. One does not need to look too far in history in order to ascertain the exact extent of the loss that Pakistan has suffered. The attack on primary school going children at the Army Public School in Peshawar on the 16th of December, 2014 is enough to silence anyone still in doubt over Pakistan's loss. However, such attacks have increasingly questioned the capabilities of the state in providing the most basic level of security to the Pakistani people. This is not to say that the state hasn't been doing anything. The point is that sheer frequency of such incidents in Pakistan has highlighted the many limitations of the state in tackling terrorism to the people, thus inevitably causing them to become fearful of their lives and to resorting to all means necessary to at least ensure their own security. Apart from terrorism, a general breakdown in law and order within the country has further prompted people to take matters pertaining to their personal security in their own hands. One such example of a shambolic law and order situation within the country can be seen in Pakistan's largest metropolis, i.e. Karachi. Gang wars within the relatively poorer neighbourhoods of Karachi, widespread instances of theft at gun-point, target killings and extortion had become so commonplace over the years that the government was forced to start a full scale paramilitary operation in order to bring some semblance of peace and security to Karachi. Therefore, it does

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not seem too shocking now to have witnessed a decrease in the proportion of Pakistanis being asked to hand in their weapons to the government.

However, just addressing this public opinion on gun control within a ‘security/law and order’ narrative does not intend to put a blanket over the broader relationship of Pakistanis with guns.

According to statistics published by gunpolicy.org, in the category of number of privately owned guns, both licit and illicit, Pakistan ranks 6th out of 178 countries. This makes Pakistan one of the most heavily militarized countries of the world. Furthermore, those residing within Pakistan have also become well acquainted to the infamous ‘gun culture’ within the Country. In Pakistan, there is a rather peculiar norm of celebrating festive occasions with gunfire. Hearing gunfire on weddings and during election results is an everyday occurrence with which every Pakistani is normalized. Furthermore, carrying a gun is often seen as a source of pride and a display of one’s strength and standing in the society. This phenomenon is particularly true in Pakistan’s tribal belt. With more guns out in the open, the crime rate has also been on the rise. There is no denying the fact that the more guns there are with people, the greater is the likelihood of crimes taking place. Nowhere in Pakistan’s urban areas has this proportional relationship between crime and weapons proven truer than in Karachi. However, even in the face of such acts of violence wrought by these conventional firearms, prevailing public opinion on guns still has not changed.

Conclusion

Therefore, it is fundamentally important for government and state agencies to actively take steps towards changing this mindset of celebrating guns in Pakistan. Without educating and informing people about the negative impact of firearms on the law and order situation within the country, all efforts that are currently being taken to curb violence, crime and terrorism by law enforcing agencies will inevitably go in vain. Those in power have to ensure that all security measures and operations are coupled with an active agenda of demilitarizing Pakistan both physically as well as ideologically. Needless to say, without incorporating a multi-pronged approach for tackling the use of firearms, gun control in Pakistan will sadly remain an illusion.

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