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Global Poll: Widespread Perception of Serious Lack of Political Tolerance

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College Park, MD—A new WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 24 nations from around the world finds a widespread perception of a serious lack of political tolerance. Large majorities perceive that people in their nation are not completely free to express unpopular views, that opposition parties do not get a fair chance to express their views and try to influence government decision, and that legislators have limited freedom to express views that differ from their political party.

The poll, sponsored by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and released in conjunction with International Democracy Day, also finds overwhelming support throughout the world for the principle that diversity of political expression should be allowed, and support for democracy more broadly.

WorldPublicOpinion.org conducted the poll of 21,285 respondents in 24 nations that comprise 64 percent of the world's population. This includes most of the largest nations—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia and South Africa—as well as Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Germany, Great Britain, France, Israel, Poland, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Kenya, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, the Republic of Korea, and Palestine. The margins of error range from +/-2 to 4 percentage points. The surveys were conducted across the different nations between April 4 and June 30, 2009. Not all questions were asked in all nations.

A statement on the global poll, issued by IPU President Theo-Ben Gurirab is available at www.ipu.org/dem-e/idd/statement09.pdf

When asked how free they think people are to express unpopular views in their country, without fear of being harassed or punished, in no nations does a majority of people say they are completely free. On average across all nations polled, just 24 percent say people in their country are completely free to express unpopular political views, 42 percent that they are somewhat free, and 30 percent that they are not very free.

Asked how often opposition parties get “a fair chance to express their views and try to influence government,” in only 4 out of 21 nations do majorities say “most of the time.” On average only 37 percent say “most of the time,” while nearly six in ten say “only sometimes” (38%) or “rarely” (20%).

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Asked how often members of the legislature “feel free to express views that differ from the official views of their own political party,” in only one country does a majority consider that legislators feel free most of the time, while in 20 out of 23 nations, a majority says legislators feel free only sometimes or rarely. On average, only 28 percent say that legislators feel free to express divergent views most of the time while more than two out of three say only sometimes (37%) or rarely (29%).

These perceptions of a lack of political tolerance are in sharp contrast to overwhelming support for the freedom to express diverse views. Asked “How important do you think it is for people to be free to express unpopular political views, without fear of being harassed or punished?” majorities in all nations say such freedom is very or somewhat important. On average 86 percent say this freedom is important, and 58 percent call it very important.

“Around the world we find a remarkable consensus that a diversity of political views should be tolerated, together with a widespread perception that such diversity is not fully tolerated in society in general, or even in the functioning of legislatures,” comments Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org.

The poll also found strong support for democracy in general. Asked “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?” majorities in all 24 nations say it is very or somewhat important. In no country do those calling this unimportant exceed about one in four. On average across all nations polled, 90 percent say it is important to live in a democratically governed country, and 67 percent say it is very important.

People who support greater political tolerance are also more apt to support democracy. Among those who say it is very important for people to be free to express unpopular political views, 80 percent said it is very important to live in a country that is governed democratically, but this drops to 48 percent among those who say such freedom is just somewhat important and to 41 percent among those who say it is not important at all.

Though none of the nations polled have parity in gender representation in their national legislatures, views are mixed on whether women are fairly represented. On average across all countries polled, a modest majority of men think women are fairly represented, but a plurality of women think they are not. In 12 nations a majority says that women are fairly represented (as does a plurality in one more); in eight nations a majority says they are not.

There is also wide variation in perceptions of how fairly ethnic, religious or national minorities are represented in national legislatures, though overall views lean in the direction that minorities are not fairly represented. Asked how fairly “minorities, including ethnic, religious, or national minorities” are represented in the national legislature, eight nations have a plurality or majority saying that they are fairly represented. Ten nations say they are not fairly represented and five nations are evenly divided.

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