The Karzai government’s former Finance Minister, Ashraf Ghani is currently the leading 2014 presidential candidate among Afghan students. This is one of the findings of a survey of 13 legal scholars and judges of a visiting delegation and 47 students attending Malaysian universities. The survey was conducted in the greater Kuala Lumpur area by the International Institute for Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia earlier this year.

The government lawyers surveyed were all university-educated men, mainly 30 to 50 years old. 69 per cent put their first language as Dari/Persian and 31 per cent as Pashto. The great majority indicated affiliation with Sunni Islam followed by “Reformist Islam”. All but two indicated that Shi’a Muslims were well treated in Afghanistan. Their overall assessment of the Karzai government was that its performance was only “average” to “poor”. The major issues that will need to be addressed by the new government to be elected in 2014 were seen to be education, employment and job creation, and achieving national unity. Rule of law, strong military and police forces, and the provision of a basic infrastructure were also important. To the question “Should Islam be the only foundation for laws in Afghanistan or can codified secular laws or Pashtunwali customary principles be used?” 54 per cent replied that Islam and other principles could be used, while 31 per cent stated only Islam should be used. A clear majority preferred an “Islamic state” to the present constitutional framework. A majority preferred the election of provincial governors rather than as at present, their appointment by President Karzai. The respondents were split almost equally on whether or not they would accept an interim Taliban controlled government if required by a peace agreement. The scholars did not show a high opinion of Afghan political parties - a pragmatic minority proposed a coalition of parties as being best suited to form a post-Karzai government.

Numbers were split equally on whether or not US military bases were acceptable in the country after the main foreign troop pullout in 2014. The scholars gave a 50-65 per cent chance for achieving a peaceful settlement of the current 33 year old conflict by the end of 2015. Regarding the 2012 US-Afghan Strategic Alliance Agreement signed by President Karzai, 54 per cent approved,
while 31 per cent disapproved. None objected to females being able to attend secondary schools and universities.

The younger generation of Afghan university students surveyed mostly hail from Kabul and the eastern Nangarhar province. Most were males 20-25 years of age. 64 per cent indicated their first language was Dari/Persian and 32 per cent as Pashto. Only one respondent believed the Shi’a in Afghanistan were not well treated. Virtually all students adhered to Sunni Islam, although a few also indicated they followed Salafism, Sufism or Shi’ism. Students had a more positive perception of government performance than the legal scholars, as Karzai’s performance was rated “good” or “average” by equal numbers of students as the dominant responses. Apart from security, the key issues to be addressed in Afghanistan are the education system, economy and poverty alleviation, health care and hospitals, and the justice system, in that order of priority. Suggestions for improving education include building more schools, providing student scholarships, making English a compulsory language, and recruiting foreign teachers. Contrary to the majority of scholars, almost all students believed that Islam should be the only foundation of laws for Afghanistan. With views similar to those of the scholars, a majority of students indicated a preference for an Islamic state over the current 2004 Constitutional framework and thought that provincial governors should be elected officials rather than presidential appointees.

The students held very negative views on Afghan political parties but were prepared to indicate their preferences for Afghan’s next president with the following order of support: Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (31 per cent), Ramadhan Bashar Dost (17 per cent), Abdullah Abdullahi (14 per cent), Mullah Omar (2 per cent), and Sebghatullah Mujaddidi (2 per cent). 55 per cent of the students would be unwilling to have an interim Taliban-controlled government as part of a peace process – 43 per cent however would.

A majority (55 per cent) were not prepared to accept US bases in the country after the 2014 pullout while 45 per cent would. On individuals’ assessments of the probability of a peaceful settlement by December 2015, there was a spread of views with a mean position of around 65 per cent probability indicating relative optimism by the students for their future. Threats externally rather than internally were the dominant security concern, particularly those originating from Pakistan and Iran. Regarding the 2012 US-Afghan Strategic Alliance Agreement signed by President Karzai, 60 per cent approved, while 40 per cent disapproved.

A high 72 per cent of student respondents (and 77 per cent of scholars) believed “war lords” involved in human rights abuses should be tried in court. This would require the repeal of the National Stability and Reconciliation Law, passed by the Afghan parliament with a two-thirds majority in 2007, which provided a general amnesty for all perpetrators who committed crimes against humanity.
before 2001. As one commentator emphasised, ignoring this issue to date could be viewed as an insult to the innocent victims of grave human rights abuses and tends to provide a green light for a repeat of such crimes in the future.

Although some strong polarisation of views exists, especially regarding the stationing of US bases in the country after 2014, there was close similarity in many views between the “scholars” and the “students” indicating an absence of generational dissidence. Hopefully, the leaders that the students aspire to be at the helm of the post-Karzai government will lead them to the generally optimistic outcome they are anticipating. Our fervent prayer is that they will not be disappointed.

International Forum on "The Plight of Muslims in Burma in the 21st Century" (Kuala Lumpur, 19 June 2013)

Elmira Akhmetova, IAIS Malaysia

A one-day international forum entitled The Plight of Muslims in Burma in the 21st Century: An Initiative for Solution & the Way Forward was held on 19 June 2013 at IAIS Malaysia to search for remedies to the ongoing ethnic violence, segregation, displacement, forcible expulsions and religious intolerance afflicting Muslim minorities in Myanmar. It explored the ways to create a sympathetic atmosphere for refugees who are victims of genocide and humiliation. Potential methods of applying pressure on the Burmese authorities to stop maltreatment and violence against Muslims and to safeguard their dignity and rights as citizens were also discussed during the forum, which was attended by more than 400 participants.

The event was jointly organised by IAIS Malaysia, Rohingya Arakanese Refugee Committee (RARC) and Burma Muslim Community (BMC). Contributing partners included the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), Malaysian Youth Council (MBM), Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Universiti Malaya (PMIUM), Jaringan Anak Muda (JAM), Al-Fikrah.Net, Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), The Cordoba Foundation (TCF, United Kingdom), the Diplomatic Institute of The State of Qatar (TDI) and the Global Movement of Moderates Foundation (GMMF). Media representatives covering the forum were Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), TV Al-Hijrah, Radio IKIM FM, Al-Jazeera International, The Arakan Observer Group, Rohingya Vision TV, Sinar Harian, Aswaq Magazine and Amilin TV.