

Reinventing Pakistan

Welcome to Lahore, where an explosion of art and media is offering a vibrant alternative to the strictures of religious conservatives and is transforming one of America's most important—and most ambivalent—allies

BY MOHSIN HAMID

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ED KASHI

ONE NIGHT, as troops from Pakistan's army massed 300 miles away to hunt for remnants of Al Qaeda in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, I went to a concert in my hometown of Lahore. It was a pleasant evening, warm, with a light breeze carrying the smell of April flowers: flame trees, magnolias, jasmine. We sat outside on carpets spread across the lawn of a white bungalow, the audience ranging from teenagers with soul patches and ponytails to elegant matrons in saris. My back ached slightly, and I mentioned this to a friend as I reached for the only available cushion I could see.

"Don't even think about it," she said, patting her very pregnant belly. "It's mine."

The music we had come to hear was a fusion of modern and traditional percussion. There were seven musicians, all Pakistani. Three wore Western clothes and played Western instruments: keyboards, drum set and trumpet. Three wore loose-fitting, traditional Pakistani dress and played the *dhhol*: a heavy, two-sided barrel of a drum hung from the shoulders on a thick leather strap. The seventh played a slender Egyptian drum held between the knees. The performance was a work in progress, an experiment that the group hoped to refine and take on tour to Europe and the United States in the summer.

For all their individual talents, the musicians had trouble finding a groove. But at times the audience could sense the potential of what was struggling to emerge, and in those moments I could see the excitement on people's faces.

The words "explosion" and "revolution" are often applied to Pakistan, a nuclear power contending with a tangle of domestic and geopolitical challenges, but the words should also be applied to the cultural life of the nation. Pakistan is witnessing an explosion of music, part of a revolution in art and

media with potentially far greater appeal to its young people than the sermons of religious conservatives urging them to abandon modernity and confront perceived threats to Islam. Over the past three years, a dozen independent television channels have sprung up, from general networks to specialized news, fashion and music stations. Combined with a boom in advertising, increasing economic growth and rapid cable and satellite penetration, these outlets are fueling not only a new industry, but also a new culture—one not limited to a narrow Westernized elite.

True, Pakistan is desperately poor, with half the population of 150 million illiterate and many subsisting on less than a dollar a day. But between 30 and 40 percent live in cities, and that percentage rises to more than 50 percent when one includes settlements within commuting distance of urban centers. For this half of Pakistan's population, electricity, telephones and television have become a part of ordinary life. Even in rural villages, TV can be found in restaurants and tea shops that are often as crowded with viewers as movie theaters. Last year, when members of the Pakistani rock band Junoon visited some of the country's most destitute and isolated regions, they found themselves mobbed by fans who knew their songs by heart.

This budding mass culture, virtually unknown to the West, is being created in cities like Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore. Karachi, home to 13 million people, is Pakistan's commercial capital, an enormous, humming metropolis whose occasional spasms of sectarian and criminal violence make for international headlines. Islamabad is Pakistan's political capital, small and quiet, with fewer than a million inhabitants and yet the most international of Pakistan's cities.

But Lahore occupies a special place in the new mass culture. A prosperous city of seven million, Pakistan's cultural capital has long been a bastion of liberalism, hedonism and easy living, where late-night partying, open-air dining and colorful festivals, such as the kite-flying extravaganza of Basant every spring, draw visitors from all over the country and beyond.

DURING THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES, the Mogul rulers of what was then India left Lahore a magnificent fort with an entrance ramp wide enough for elephants, a royal mosque among the largest in the world when it was built, and a palace with a mirrored ceiling that reflects candlelight like the flickering of stars. More recently, the British Empire built universities, clubs, courts of law and military quarters, or cantonments, in Lahore. The young protagonist in resident Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* told "tales of the size and beauty of Lahore"; a visiting Mark Twain came to the conclusion that he "could easily learn to prefer an elephant to any other vehicle." Famous for producing poets and artists and writers, the city is now also becoming known for its newscasters, actors, fashion models and pop stars.

And not a moment too soon, because Pakistan needs symbols of openness, debate and the potential for progress and prosperity in times that many Pakistanis find dangerous and deeply unsettling, as I was reminded by my parents' night watchman when I went to their house after the concert. Rahim Khan is from Pakistan's North-West Frontier province, from the mountains near the tribal areas where recent fighting has taken place. He looked worried, so I asked him what was the matter.

"Have you heard that the army is going back into Waziristan?" he said, referring to a region that has seen heavy casualties among both soldiers and civilians in operations to hunt down foreign militants belonging to Al Qaeda, the Taliban and other groups.

"Yes," I said.

"It isn't good," he said. "Pakistanis will kill Pakistanis, Muslims will kill Muslims, all for the Americans."

PAKISTANI SKEPTICISM about U.S. intentions runs deep. To try to get a better understanding of its origins, I went to see one of Lahore's most distinguished journalists, Rashed Rahman, who has covered political developments in Pakistan for more than two decades. We sat under an intricately inlaid wooden ceiling in his house in the Cantonment neighborhood in the eastern part of the city, he beside an antique writing desk, and I on an old leather couch. He lit a Dunhill cigarette and shut his eyes for a moment. "Back in the 1950s and '60s," he said, "there were lots of Americans living in Lahore. People wanted American cars and American products. Elvis was huge here. Pakistan was an impor-

tant American cold war ally. The U.S. supported our military regime and gave us aid and weapons."

His desk lamp went out, suddenly and for no apparent reason. But other lights in the room remained on, so he shrugged and continued. "Pakistanis thought our alliance was meant not just to protect America from communism, but also to protect Pakistan from India. So when Pakistan and India fought a war in 1965, we expected America's support. Instead, America slapped us with sanctions and cut off our aid, because America had come to see India as a counterweight to China. After the 1965 Pakistan-India war, America acquired the reputation in Pakistan of being a fair-weather friend."

He stubbed out his cigarette. "For over a decade, relations between Pakistan and America kept getting colder," he said. "Gen. Zia-ul-Haq seized power in a coup in 1977. Two years later, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, bringing them close to the massive oil reserves of the Persian Gulf. President Reagan invited General Zia to the White House and gave him three billion dollars of aid in exchange for Pakistan's support against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Thus began the most disastrous period in Pakistan's history. General Zia's regime set out to Islamize society, and it didn't tolerate any protest or dissent. Laws that ended equal rights for women were passed. Democracy activists were imprisoned. But worst of all, in camps near our border with Afghanistan, the regime worked with America to create a monster called the mujahedin to fight the Soviets." He was referring, of course, to the now infamous guerrilla groups composed of Afghan and Muslim fighters from around the world.

His words reminded me of my days as a schoolboy in Lahore in the 1980s. Religious militants quickly spread from the mujahedin training camps into the rest of country. Guns and hard-eyed men with beards became commonplace in our cities; as a more intolerant and narrow brand of Islam took hold among civic authorities, my fellow teenagers and I would be arrested just for going out on dates. Radio and television began broadcasting news in Arabic, a language spoken by very few Pakistanis. And my father, then a professor of economics at Punjab University, came home with stories about colleagues resigning after being held up at gunpoint for expressing views that were "un-Islamic."

"The face of Pakistani society was destroyed during our alliance with America in the 1980s," Rahman went on. "Then Zia was killed in a plane crash in 1988, and once again the army stepped back," allowing the return of civilian rule. "From 1988 to 1999, elected governments were in power, with Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif alternating as prime minister. But relations with America deteriorated. In 1989 the Soviets were finally driven from Afghanistan, and the very next year the Americans slapped Pakistan with the first of many sanctions for our nuclear weapons program, which they had turned a blind eye to during the 1980s. In Pakistan, the perception was that America had flushed us down the toilet because we were no longer needed."

MOHSIN HAMID's first novel, *Moth Smoke*, was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. ED KASHI photographed New York City's and San Francisco's ports in the January issue of

SMITHSONIAN.

He leaned back in his chair and spread his arms. “Many people here may not be educated, but they know what has happened in the past. So they are skeptical of our current alliance with America.” He smiled. “And if you look at the track record, their skepticism is logical.”

PAKISTAN’S CURRENT ALLIANCE with the United States began shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. America’s secretary of state, Colin Powell, called Pakistan’s president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, and asked for the use of Pakistani bases, airspace and logistical support for America’s military campaign in Afghanistan. Musharraf, a Westward-leaning reformist who had seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, agreed, thereby ending Pakistan’s backing of the Taliban. In an address to the nation, the president explained that refusing the U.S. request “may endanger our territorial integrity and our survival,” but by supporting the United States “we could emerge as a responsible and honourable nation and all our problems could diminish.”

The overwhelming sentiment among Pakistanis, captured in newspaper editorials and television interviews, was that America’s war in Afghanistan would bring enormous suffering to fellow Muslims in one of the poorest countries in the world. Religious conservatives were furious: “Any collaboration with the United States is treason,” declared a cleric at Islamabad’s Lal Masjid mosque in late September 2001. But the massive antigovernment street clashes the naysayers promised failed to materialize. “I was in a peace march,” my mother told me. “There were hundreds of us, all women with placards and flowers, and we managed only to attract the attention of one or two foreign journalists. But along the way we ran into a couple dozen men with beards chanting, ‘Death to America,’ and they were mobbed by international television crews and photographers. It was like they were the Beatles.”

After the defeat of the Taliban in 2002, Pakistan’s role shifted to hunting down Al Qaeda operatives inside Pakistan itself. More than 500 Al Qaeda and Taliban members were captured by Pakistani soldiers and handed over to the United States. Recognizing Pakistan’s contribution, Colin Powell announced in March 2004 that the United States would designate the country a major non-NATO ally. Some Pakistanis, particularly religious conservatives, sympathized with the goals of Al Qaeda and the Taliban and condemned the Pakistani government’s continued support of the United States. (*Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl was murdered in Karachi in 2002 by terrorists linked to Al Qaeda.) Others, like my parents’ night watchman, saw army operations in the border regions as drawing innocent Pakistanis into America’s fight against Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. America’s invasion of Iraq, treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and support for the policies of Israel’s prime minister Ariel Sharon have also sparked widespread condemnation in Pakistan.

But although they may not like what America is doing

around the world, most Pakistanis are also increasingly fed up with the religious militants in their midst. And for good reason. In recent years, both Sunni and Shiite militants had grown increasingly assertive, and their violence against fellow Pakistanis had spiraled out of control.

Fatima Hassan is a young painter and a member of Pakistan’s Shiite minority, which represents about 20 percent of the population and has been the prime target of some Sunni militant groups. Encouraged by recent changes in Pakistan, she decided to return home from the United States. I went to see her in a modern house in Lahore’s upscale Defense neighborhood where she was working on a mural of decorative patterns and floral forms. She was wearing track pants and a T-shirt, and her hands and arms were splattered with paint. “We just didn’t feel secure,” she said of the decade before Musharraf’s takeover. “There was a period when they were killing Shiite doctors, trying to scare educated professionals into leaving Pakistan. My brother-in-law was a doctor, and he was threatened. Some men came for him at the house, but he wasn’t home. After that, we were petrified whenever he was late coming back from the hospital. He moved into a hostel for a month so they couldn’t find him.”

She crossed her arms and shook her head. “It was really bad. My brother’s friend was killed. Lots of Shiite business leaders got shot. But things have gotten much better under Musharraf. The killing has almost stopped. At night, when I was trying to sleep, I used to be terrified of people coming to the house. It isn’t like that anymore. Thank God.”

Although sectarian violence persists—particularly in Karachi, wracked by recent bombings—government officials have made stopping it a top priority and begun speaking out against the ideologies that underpin militant movements. “Musharraf said on television that none of these militants should think they have the right to decide what Islam is for the rest of us,” Hassan told me. “It was a good thing to hear our president say.”

NO LESS IMPORTANT than Pakistan’s alliance with the United States has been the shift in its relations with India. At independence from Britain in 1947, Pakistan, with a population of 70 million, was partitioned from Hindu-majority India, with its population of 480 million, as a homeland for the region’s Muslims. The fate of the predominantly Muslim state of Kashmir (with three million inhabitants) was left undecided, and the two countries have been fighting over it ever since. India controls two-thirds of Kashmir’s territory, Pakistan the remainder. But both countries claim Kashmir in its entirety, with India accusing Pakistan of supporting an insurgency by Muslim rebels in the Indian part of Kashmir and Pakistan accusing India of refusing to obey a 1948 U.N. resolution calling for Kashmir’s people to decide which country they would rather belong to.

In December 2001, five armed men attacked the Indi-

an Parliament. Claiming that they were Pakistani-backed militants, India moved more than 500,000 troops to the border and deployed its nuclear-capable missiles. Pakistan responded in kind, sending more than 300,000 troops to the border. For 18 months, the two nuclear powers stood poised for war. Lahore is only 20 miles from India, and convoys of trucks rumbled through the city for weeks, delivering supplies to our soldiers massed along the 1,800-mile-long border. Helicopters flew low overhead, artillery fire was exchanged to the north and there were rumors that traffic on the freeway was being stopped so our fighter pilots could practice landing on it in case an Indian nuclear strike destroyed our airfields.

But a growing realization that the consequences of nuclear war were unthinkable, coupled with intense mediation efforts by the United States and other countries, brought Pakistan and India back from the brink in May 2003. On a historic visit by Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to Pakistan in January 2004, both he and Pakistani president Musharraf committed themselves to negotiating their differences, including the status of Kashmir. The restoration of commercial air links and an easing of travel restrictions followed soon after.

Suddenly, anxiety gave way to optimism and euphoria. For the first time in more than a decade, India and Pakistan agreed to a full tour of Pakistan by the Indian cricket team, unleashing in March an influx of Indian spectators so huge that Pakistan had to set up special visa camps in India to accommodate demand. Journalists, film stars, celebrities and politicians, including both children of India's late prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and his wife, Sonia, descended on the five match venues of Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Peshawar and Multan. So did thousands of ordinary cricket fans, swept up in a sport that, for the fifth of humanity that lives in South Asia, has an importance, in American terms, roughly equal to baseball, football and basketball combined.

The series was unlike any sporting event I had ever seen. In stadiums in all five cities, Pakistanis cheered for the Indian team and painted the flags of both countries on their faces; they even launched fireworks to celebrate the Indian victory in the final and decisive one-day match in Lahore. Outside the stadiums, Pakistani shopkeepers gave Indian visitors gifts, and restaurant owners refused to let them pay for their meals. I did a quick survey in Lahore's Main Market among several boys who sell *paan*, a delicacy made of nuts and fragrant syrup wrapped inside a betel leaf. "We were happy for the Indians to be here," one named Saleem said. "Of course we didn't let them pay. We wanted them to know they were our guests. We are fed up with war. We want peace." Loudly, the others agreed.

"The massive outpouring of hospitality and affection was spontaneous and genuine," Ejaz Haider, an editor at the *Daily Times*, an English-language newspaper based in Lahore, told me. "The Indians were taken aback. The image they had of Pakistan was of a violent, conservative state whose peo-

ple hated them. Instead, they had a reception more generous than anything they could possibly have imagined. I had Indian journalists telling me that Lahore is cleaner and more beautiful than any city in India."

For the most part, Pakistanis expected that India's prime minister Vajpayee, who had made peace with Pakistan both a personal mission and a plank in his reelection platform, would continue in power after India's elections, which were held in April and May. But the stunning defeat of Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party by the Congress Party, led by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, created uncertainty about the future of India-Pakistan relations. While the Pakistan government welcomed comments by Gandhi and incoming prime minister Manmohan Singh that the peace process would continue, many here speculate that it will suffer, with the *Daily Times* commenting that "there may be some unexpected hurdles ahead." But others pointed out that Gandhi's son and daughter, Rahul, 34, and Priyanka, 33, had demonstrated their support for peace by coming to Karachi for the cricket finals, where they had clearly been thrilled by the reception they received.

WHAT NO DOUBT IMPRESSED the Indian visitors, and what impresses even Pakistanis returning after just a few years abroad, is a nation emerging from economic stagnation and years of inaction against the domestic terrorism of religious militants. The country has won praise from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for its economic turnaround. Pakistan's stock market was among the world's top performing last year, up 66 percent, and real estate values are soaring. Although still generated from a tiny base, tax revenues have jumped 40 percent in the past four years, enabling the government to spend more on development, especially on education—a critical investment for Pakistanis under 19, roughly half of its current population.

A good example of this vibrancy is the creation of many new private educational institutions. Navid Shahzad, a literature professor and education consultant, helped found Beaconhouse National University (BNU) in Lahore. I went to see her in her office, walking past bulletin boards plastered with announcements for student plays and concerts and art projects. "Three things happened in higher education," she told me. "First, the government finally understood that it did not have the resources to meet the education needs of the population by itself." She raised two fingers. "Second, they realized that the crumbling public education system—and the religious *madrasas* [schools] that stepped in to fill the gaps—contributed to the problems of unemployment and militancy in our society." She raised a third finger. "Finally, they saw that some private universities in Pakistan were providing qualitatively superior education in a way which was financially self-sustaining."

A group of students with backpacks slung over their T-shirts walked by outside her glass door. "So," she continued, "after years of being a public-sector fiefdom, things are finally changing. In the last year, seven or eight private universities were granted charters in our province alone. BNU

opened five months ago, and we now have 109 students, including 16 international students. We plan to have 2,000 within five years. Our nonprofit foundation already has an endowment which allows us to give over 30 percent of our students' financial aid. And even though Pakistan is supposed to be a dangerous place, I've had no difficulty recruiting faculty from Britain, South Africa, Germany and the United States. People hear about what we're doing, and they're excited to come and teach here."

And what is BNU teaching? She smiled. "The demand for people in media, culture and the arts is booming," she said. "It's driven by the proliferation of television channels, and now also of radio and newspapers, as well as by a growing middle class. BNU is training people to meet that demand. Many of our programs are the first of their kinds in Pakistan: photojournalism, for example. At public universities they stopped teaching sculpture because of the Islamic injunction against idolatry. But here, we teach sculpture. And we teach many disciplines that marry art and technology and make new things possible, like sound engineering and computer visual effects."

Down the hall from Shahzad, in an office shared by four female faculty members from three different countries, I met Zahra Khan, a recent graduate of Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, who has starred in a popular television sitcom here. She was wearing glasses and a diamond stud in her nose and sat at her desk under a poster for the Quentin Tarantino film *Pulp Fiction*. "Music, television sitcoms, dramatic serials—everything is exploding right now," she said. "Young people are expressing themselves, and powerful modern forces are finally taking on the old conservative ones. It's really exciting to be part of it."

OF COURSE, few in Lahore would argue that Pakistan's long-overdue embrace of television is a panacea for its deep-rooted problems, as Ahmed Rashid, the internationally best-selling author of *Taliban* and *Jihad*, is only too happy to point out. Sporting both a beard and a pair of shorts, an unusual combination here, Rashid led me into his study, a single room entirely lined with bookshelves and separated from his house in the Cantonment by a walkway shaded by hanging vines. His electricity and phone service were both out.

"The problem Pakistan faces right now," he told me, folding his legs underneath him, "is that our government has a two-track policy, a kind of institutionalized schizophrenia. Take the issue of militants," he said, referring to the thousands of foreigners and Pakistanis engaged in an armed struggle against the West, against India in Kashmir, or against those who practice a different form of Islam. "Musharraf has promised to clamp down on all militants operating in Pakistan. But in reality, two different things are going on. The army is trying to eliminate Al Qaeda, foreign militants who are in Pakistan to fight a global jihad against America. But the army is not trying to eliminate Pakistani militants who want to fight India in Kashmir. The army

wants these domestic Kashmiri militant groups to pause their activities, but it doesn't want to dismantle them yet in case negotiations with India fail. Unfortunately, Al Qaeda and our domestic militant groups are deeply embedded in each other. So the army's policies are pushing in two opposite directions at the same time."

The lights came back on, and Rashid got up to send a fax, then gave up in frustration because the phone was still out. "Many Pakistani militants think Musharraf is a long-term threat," he went on. "Especially the sectarian groups, the Sunni extremists who are instigating violence against Shiites. They've been fingered twice for trying to assassinate Musharraf," in two attacks 11 days apart in December 2003. "The army is trying to distinguish these sectarian groups from the ones fighting for Kashmir and go after them. But because all these groups—Al Qaeda, the sectarian groups and the groups fighting in Kashmir—are interrelated, it's hard to do."

He poured me a cup of tea. "It's the same situation with Abdul Qadeer Khan and this entire nuclear proliferation scandal," he told me, referring to the mastermind of Pakistan's nuclear program who, in January, admitted selling nuclear secrets to Libya, North Korea and Iran. "Right after September 11, we should have said, privately perhaps, to the Americans and the International Atomic Energy Agency, 'Look, we want to come clean. We are guilty of proliferation. But that's over now, and here's how we're going to assure you that those days are finished.' The army should have taken responsibility. Instead, the army waited until we got caught with our pants down, with Libya and Iran telling the world that we helped them, and then the army set up A. Q. Khan as a scapegoat to limit the damage. So now we're in the same position of cooperating with the Americans and the IAEA, but only after destroying our own credibility." In particular, Musharraf's decision to pardon the once hugely popular Khan after his confession was widely seen as an attempt to limit the damage of the scandal.

Rashid also criticizes the undemocratic nature of Musharraf's government and its antagonism toward the parties of former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. Rashid's concerns would spill into the news a week later, in May, when Nawaz Sharif's brother, Shahbaz, attempted to return from exile abroad and was immediately deported by armed security personnel.

Rashid checked his fax machine again. It was still not working, so he called out to his driver and asked him to take the fax to the bazaar to be sent off. "At the end of the day," he said, after the driver had left, "the schizophrenic nature of our government—hunting some militants but protecting others, admitting proliferation but passing the blame, liberalizing the economy but destroying the two mainstream political parties—is tied up with Pakistan's search for its own identity. We need to decide which way we want to go. The fundamentalists don't have mass support, but they're very vocal. It's time for the rest of civil society—for businesspeople, traders, teachers, professionals, intellectuals—to find its

voice. There is mass support for peace with India, and economic development, and an end to militancy. But the question is: Are we at that tipping point where mass support can finally change our policies?”

AFTER MY MEETING WITH RASHID, I decided not to take the most direct route home. Instead, I drove down Mall Road, with its old, shady trees, many planted by the British before Pakistan’s independence. The divider was lush green, with thick beds of orange flowers on long, elegant stems. I passed a white mosque near my grandfather’s former house. The mosque had been small when I was a child, barely more than a room. Now its minarets and glossy green dome jutted into the sky, festooned with flags pulled taut by a stiff breeze—signs, perhaps, that a religious assembly would soon take place.

I turned left along the canal. Weeping willows along its banks dragged the tips of their branches through the water. The road had been improved lately, modern underpasses transforming it into a quick-moving artery for traffic through the city. At intersections, billboards with attractive young women and men advertised clothes, cars, credit cards, ice cream. On one billboard was a splattering of dark paint where someone with conservative views and good aim had tried to obliterate a particularly fetching female face.

I remembered my mother telling me about a local production of *The Phantom of the Opera* she had seen. A woman wearing Western-style trousers and a shirt, but also a head scarf, had introduced the show. “At first,” my mother told me, “I thought it was silly. Why bother with a conservative head scarf if you are going to put on those tightfitting clothes? But then I listened to her speak, and she was confident and spoke well. So I thought, if it makes her feel more comfortable to wear a head scarf, then fine. The important thing is that she was well educated and free to speak her mind.”

As the city of Lahore, and Pakistan as a whole, leaves behind two decades of repression and violent intimidation by religious militants, more and more people are finding their voices. And much of what they have to say reflects a longing for peace and progress. Even if overshadowed in the news by the explosions of bombs, Pakistan’s other explosions—of music, media and mass culture—are powerful and growing sources of hope. ●