

Nov 04, 2016 by [Cynthia P. Schneider](#)

The Other Pakistan ^[1]

Salman Ahmad, Pakistani rock musician and founder of the popular band *Junoon* (as well as doctor, author, and film maker) explained last Saturday night to the standing room only crowd in the General Assembly of the United Nations that it was the video which pushed him into action. The video, of two men holding down a teenage girl while another beat her, sent by a friend from Pakistan, prompted Ahmad to fly to Pakistan from New York, his adopted home, to find the answer to the question that was tormenting him: "Which was the real Pakistan?"

Was it the country steeped in Sufi traditions of poetry, art, and culture? The country whose verse had cried out for freedom of expression for over one thousand years? Or the country where teenage girls are beaten publicly for alleged crimes of improper behavior?

Fueled by the horrific story of Daniel Pearl's tragic death and videos of Taliban brutality, Americans tend to associate Pakistan more with extremism and random violence than with poetry, music, and culture. But the media paints a distorted picture of Pakistan, as audiences of the Asia Society's current exhibition, *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art of Pakistan* and of Salman Ahmad's *Concert for Pakistan* can attest.

At the historic event sponsored by the Pakistani Mission to the United Nations and held in the General Assembly hall, Salman Ahmad brought musicians from Ireland to Iran (including Irish sensation Gavin Rossdale and the Danish hip hop group Outlandish) together to raise awareness and funds for the three million displaced persons from the Swat Valley. Sting sent a special song and message, and guests including Nobel Laureate R.K. Pachauri spoke on behalf of Pakistan and its people. The hospitable, vibrant, and intellectual Pakistan they described clashed with the media's drumbeat of extremism. Likewise, the moderate, tolerant version of Islam presented at the Concert on Saturday by Naïf al Matawan (creator of *The 99* comic book series with superheroes based on the 99 characteristics of Allah) differed from the doctrinaire ideologies that claim more air time.

Both Salman Ahmad and Naïf al Mutawa belong to the Brookings Institution's Creative Network, a group of 200 plus leaders in arts and culture from the U.S. and the Muslim world who mingle with policymakers at the annual U.S. Islamic World Forum in Doha. They and others like them offer an opening into Arab and Muslim societies, if diplomats and policymakers are willing to do something that does not come easily -- take arts and culture seriously.

In countries such as Pakistan (or Iran, for that matter), where poets have played significant roles in shaping the national narrative, arts, culture, and media regularly engage with politics. And I don't just mean Twitter. The words of Rumi and other poets, whether in verse or set to rock music, inspire the citizens of today's Pakistan, as well as its large diaspora. Poetry and art in all its forms are simply part of the fabric of life, and often can convey ideas that might not be acceptable in political forums. The curator of the current exhibition of contemporary Pakistani art at the Asia Society, Salima Hashmi, noted, "When political parties are silenced,

there is room for poets and artists."

Whether through works of art, poetry, rock music, or soap operas on TV, arts, culture, and media provide a means and a medium to reach broad swaths of the population 'under the political radar' with ideas about society, politics, and religion. Through narratives in which, for example, women assume significant roles in the family and society, they question extremist ideologies. Songs set to a traditional, rock, or hip hop beat remind academics, teenagers, and tea servers alike of the richness of Pakistani culture, and of its integral role in Pakistani identity.

For Salman Ahmad, his wife Samina, and their NGO (ssgwi.org), this concert was the beginning of a broader campaign to harness the power of arts, culture and media to strengthen civil society within Pakistan. The lawyers' movement already demonstrated the willingness of Pakistanis to defend their rights. A strong civil society movement will not solve all Pakistan's problems, but it could provide a bulwark against extremism. Increasingly, the U.S. seems to be moving away from imposing its own values abroad to empowering local voices. Salman Ahmad's concert, his broader movement, and the Asia Society's exhibition offer openings for pursuing this strategy in Pakistan.
