Arts and theater in Pakistan: A front line against extremism?

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(*The Christian Science Monitor*) The stage lights are coming on in the main hall of the modernist Alhamra Arts Center. It is the last night of the Lahore Literary Festival and the venue is packed with people sitting in the aisles and standing at the rear. Hundreds more are pressed together outside at a large screen, waiting for this Sufi-inspired music, drama, and dance spectacular.

Backstage, Saadaan Peerzada, dressed in jeans and a black jacket, his gray hair tied in a ponytail, is distributing paper cups of steaming tea for the half-dozen or so performing troupes he has gathered.

Peerzada is chief operating officer of the Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop, Pakistan's premier performing arts group, and he considers tonight's performance crucial.

In recent years Rafi Peer has survived bombings and death threats, though its performances were suspended until late last year. Everyone on hand this evening is cognizant this event is taking place against a rise of radical violence, including the killings of 132 schoolchildren in Peshawar months ago, something that still reverberates in the collective mind.

Tonight's performance is intended to send a message from Pakistan's small but brave civil society movement: that words, music, and theater speak louder than guns.

Trying to reclaim civic space

"Several times we thought of leaving this country, but there's something that holds us back and that is the public contact we've developed," he said. "We feel that respect from the public; they love us."

Pakistan is a country waging multiple battles for its survival. The Army is fighting in the tribal areas along the Afghan frontier, and mosques are a front line in the war

against extremism.

Yet in theaters, art spaces, colleges, law courts, and festivals like this one, an equally important battle is being waged to reclaim Pakistan’s cultural and social spaces.

“It’s been a case of one step forward, two steps back,” said Pakistani historian Ayesha Jalal, who is at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. “Under military authoritarianism there were curbs. Now there is supposedly democracy, and yet the curbs exist on the ground, the silencing, the fear factor, the fact that people will not show up on television to speak their mind because they fear they will be targeted by the militants."

Backstage tonight, the men sport a mix of gaudy vests, ballooning trousers, multicolored turbans, amulets studded with semi-precious stones, and outrageously long mustaches. The women wear blouses richly embroidered with mirrors and coarse thread and overlain with heavy silver necklaces.

The performers come from as far away as the Desert of Cholistan and the troubled streets of Karachi, and gathering them has been a logistical nightmare for Peerzada. That the municipal Lahore government denied permission for the festival until the last minute because of security fears only added to the difficulty.

Rafi Peer’s dilemma illustrates how the space for civil society and free expression here has been shrinking, as journalists, aid workers, lawyers, and human rights activists are often targeted by one or more of the myriad militant Islamic groups that often seem to operate with impunity.

(To be sure, not all free expression is thwarted by Islamists. This month, a discussion seminar on Army behavior in Baluchistan at a premier liberal university in Lahore was apparently shut down by the powerful government intelligence agency.)

'**Sitting in a dark corner**'?

Yet militant Islamists have scored the biggest blows. Last spring saw a series of attacks on prominent secular voices. One of them, Rashid Rehman, a renowned human rights lawyer, was killed by unknown assailants in apparent retaliation for representing people accused of blasphemy.

The most serious attack on the arts came in November 2008 as 90 groups from around the globe gathered at Lahore's Qaddafi Stadium for the 11-day World Performing Arts Festival—Asia's largest theater festival and the most ambitious ever organized by Rafi Peer.

Three bombs went off with 18,000 people in the stadium. A dozen people were injured but no one was killed. Peerzada and his twin brother, Faizan, said hours later that they planned to keep festival going.

"If we bow down to the Islamists, then everything is going to be rolled back and they will always have their way, and then there will be nothing," Faizan said. "We'll just be sitting in a dark corner."

In a backstage interview in and around the performances tonight, Saadaan Peerzada said that the Taliban see arts and culture as a threat.

"The arts are seen as un-Islamic. Singing and dancing are the biggest sin for them. In my festivals we used to receive these letters written in blood, saying you are bringing foreign culture here, that you are altering people's minds," he adds.

Tonight's performance begins slowly. Mohammad Saiyaar, a Sufi dancer from Lahore and part of a drumming group, paces the stage accompanied by man playing the same few notes over and over again on an ancient-looking bagpipe. Gradually, drummers join in and Saiyaar starts gyrating, his long black hair flying as he circles the stage, coming ever closer to the edge.

The audience is most appreciative.

But Pakistan's democratic rebirth remains constantly under siege and the stakes for civil society keep rising. The December 16 storming of the Army Public School in the northwestern city of Peshawar by Tehrik-i-Taliban that killed 145 people, 132 school children—some only eight years old—shocked a nation normally inured to shock.

The "slaughter of innocents," as it became known, brought an ashen-faced Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on national television. He said "the days of terrorists are numbered" and proclaimed that there would no longer be distinctions between "bad Taliban and good Taliban." (The "good" Taliban were seen as aiding Pakistan in Afghanistan, the "bad" as attacking state and secular targets inside the nation.)

While the alleged masterminds of the attack have been arrested and the Army has stepped up attacks on Taliban strongholds in tribal areas along the Afghan border, many Pakistanis are skeptical about change for the better.

“In Pakistan today we need to be very firm and say that none of these extremist outfits are the good guys,” said Mohsin Hamid, a Lahore-based Pakistani writer whose novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

“It feels like we are closer to that than a year ago, but we’re certainly not close to being all the way there,” he said. “What appears to be a country divided is not that divided at all—it is just scared.”

Price of barbed wire has skyrocketed

The December 16 attack raised the public fear factor exponentially. The price of simple items like barbed wire has skyrocketed. Security has massively increased at all educational institutions and public venues. Many private schools now have snipers stationed at their gates.

“We are so frightened … that we have started to articulate our thoughts in ways that try to see some good in what they [the militants] are doing,” Hamid said. “They’re fighting America in Afghanistan; they're trying to balance things out with India. We are looking for reasons to think that our kidnappers are on the side we believe in, because the reality that we’ve been kidnapped [ourselves, by the Taliban] is so much more frightening.”

Fear is not the only factor challenging the health of civil society. Artistic groups like Peerzada’s struggle to survive financially in a society where high-flying ideas of “culture” take a low priority in government spending priorities.

“Our family is the most hated family in the bureaucracy,” said Peerzada, referring to his battles over funding and permission. “We’ve never had a policy for culture. It’s never been a priority. My company has never received a stipend in 35 years from the government. It’s very hard to get funding, and multinational [corporations] don’t want their name associated with festivals they consider risky.”

The Rafi Peer workshop was established in memory of Saadaan’s father Rafi Peerzada, who is still widely revered as Pakistan’s first modern playwright. After his

death in 1974, his five sons and daughter renamed the company in his honor and took on different roles.

Faizan, formerly the company president, is credited with reviving the art of puppetry in Pakistan. He died in 2012, and Saadaan has taken over as its chief operating officer and the festival organizer.

Pakistan’s liberal democracy is often dated to 2013, when elections brought a peaceful transfer of power from the previous elected government. But Peerzada said civilian rule is a mixed blessing. Like many Pakistanis he gives credit to Gen. Pervez Musharraf’s reign in the early 2000s for liberalizing the economy, unshackling the media and supporting civil society.

“The Army rule of Pervez Musharraf was the best of the political leaders. He started really bringing culture forward. The politicians would never build this,” he said referring to the sprawling Alhambra complex where the troupe performed tonight.

Arts and civil society groups say there are counter-examples to the shrinking of their space. Pakistan has seen more private media—radio, TV, and newspapers—allowing the debate of once-taboo subjects such as honor killings.

Pakistani writers such as Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, and Nadeem Aslam are being fêted at home and abroad as are its visual artists, musicians, and performers.

“Civil society is more aware than it has been before,” said Jalal at Tufts. “Whether it’s being heard is another matter. We can have all the freedom of speech, but until we are heard we are not effective."