

Pakistanis want a better future, just like us

By **Cynthia P. Schneider** and **Aakif Ahmad**, Special to CNN
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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Cynthia Schneider, Aakif Ahmad say media coverage of Pakistan ignores regular lives
- They say like Americans, Pakistanis want to work, go to school, build future
- They went to Pakistan with group seeking business, social, energy, health partnerships
- Writers: Pakistanis are open to cooperative initiatives that could build trust between nations



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two other non-profits to organize the U.S. Pakistan Leaders Forum.

(CNN) -- As Americans try to decipher where the Pakistan government, military and intelligence services stand in the fight against extremists, ordinary Pakistanis are busy trying to make their country a better place. In many cases they do this in spite of, or, to put it more kindly, in lieu of their bureaucracy.

But how could the average American know that Pakistan has an incredibly vibrant civil society? Our news is wall-to-wall Pakistan, but search for something about daily life (outside the neighborhood of Osama bin Laden's compound) and you will come up empty-handed.

Some polls say about 68% of Americans and Pakistanis distrust the other. The way Americans and Pakistanis view one another today will not change on its own. But change it must, because the third and sixth most populous countries in the world have significant strategic and demographic reasons to build a constructive long-term partnership.

"When we say we hate America, it is never the people." This is how a student from LUMS (Lahore University of Management Sciences, an elite American-style university) opened a recent conversation in Lahore. He and other people we met had no trouble distinguishing between government policies and the people of a country.

In February, at the height of the controversy surrounding Raymond Davis, the CIA contractor who shot two Pakistanis during what he asserted was a robbery, we traveled to Lahore with 15 other Americans in various fields seeking Pakistani partners to develop civil society initiatives that would add value on both sides. Over three days we argued, laughed, listened and learned.

By the end of the meeting, participants had conceived more than a dozen partnership ideas, including a web-based "sister-schools" program between sixth, seventh and eighth graders, several collaborations among colleges and universities, and initiatives in farming, dairy, irrigation and "sister-cities."

With plans to meet five more times in the next three years, this "U.S.-Pakistan Leaders Forum" will seek to develop cooperation in areas such as entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, health, social services, energy, trade, media, culture and governance.

Despite the prevailing winds of anti-Americanism, Pakistani leaders in business, nonprofits, education, agriculture, media and technology felt the partnership building we sought was long overdue, and urgently needed. Many Pakistanis recall an era of constructive civil society relationships with the United States, and want to build new ones.

Among our Pakistani counterparts there was a consensus that corruption had become institutionalized at all levels of Pakistan's government. Their response? To take up the slack, and develop civil society solutions.

Before Egyptian youth were cleaning up Tahrir Square, the Pakistani youth organization Zimmedar Shehri (Responsible Citizen) was galvanizing citizens of Lahore to take responsibility for the cleanliness of their historic city and clean up the garbage in the streets.

Private citizens and organizations are trying to compensate for the dire state of education in Pakistan. According to one participant, as many as 30% of Pakistani children have no school to attend, while another 30% go to public schools that don't have books, where buildings are falling apart and teachers hardly ever show up.

Pakistan's solution will sound familiar to Americans: charter schools, or privately run schools that are open to the public. Take for example, Seema Aziz, co-founder of the Bareeze clothing line and retail chain. She not only provides and raises funds for education, but also runs an organization that manages more than 200 schools supporting 150,000 kids.

Another group, the Citizen's Foundation, operates schools that accommodate 100,000 students in urban slums and rural Pakistan. These leaders speak passionately about every child deserving a quality education, and like many of their counterparts, both Aziz and the Citizen's Foundation have a strong focus on creating educational opportunity for girls.

Our American colleagues were impressed with the creativity, entrepreneurship and can-do attitude of the Pakistanis they met. From the conference table to the local farm, school and village shop, values Americans hold dear were on display in Pakistani society.

As long as the Pakistani government is beset by corruption and the threat of extremism, it cannot be expected to serve as the best partner for U.S. aid, private or public. But there are so many other options, and there are hopeful signs that the Pakistani population is open and receptive to American initiatives that add value.

Just ask anyone from Pakistan what music they listen to, and chances are that they will answer "Coke Studio." Coca-Cola sponsors a popular television series that records innovative mixes of traditional and pop music. According to one Pakistani we met, "Coke helps keep music alive in Pakistan."

Let's not confuse Pakistan's population of 180 million with the government or military. Not only do the Pakistani people want the same things we do -- education, economic opportunity, justice, rule of law -- but they are working hard, often in the private sphere, to achieve them. They are ready for partnerships; let's meet them halfway.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Cynthia P. Schneider and Aakif Ahmad.