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Lahore, Pakistan — Pakistan is a country where militants in the idyllic Swat Valley have torched more than 130 girls' schools. Where dozens of suicide bombings (including a major one in the capital Saturday) – and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto – have rocked civilian life. Where suspected spies are publicly executed and women have very little freedom near the Taliban-infested border with Afghanistan.

It's also a country where my niece and I can don sweat pants and T-shirts and hit the treadmill at the gym. It's an upscale coed health club where men wear shorts, treadmills are outfitted with TV screens, and the trainer brings you ice water – a custom so civilized that it should be adopted worldwide.

In my first journey back to my husband's homeland in three summers, I was struck by these contradictory faces of Pakistan. An armed security guard stoically stood watch inside the gate of our family's home in Lahore, a bustling city near the border of India.

Under his watchful eye, our boys played a boisterous game of cricket with their cousins in the front yard. In the past two years, he's only shot at a crow, but his somber presence is unsettling.

"Whatever you see is the real Pakistan," says Hassan-Askari Rizvi, a relative and a political analyst who's writing a book, "Pakistan After 9/11." "Pakistan used to be a moderate, liberal country. In major urban areas, the situation is more or less like that. Women wear jeans and drive cars. In other parts of the country, you'll see schools for girls being burned. There are still people in this country who don't realize the Taliban are a threat to the existence of this state."

Emboldened, the Taliban are slowly moving from the lawless tribal region, where the militants have found a sanctuary, into the heart of the country.

Just days after we left, a suicide bomber in Lahore killed at least eight during an Independence Day celebration, and twin suicide bombings at a weapons manufacturing plant near the capital of Islamabad took another eight lives. "They're like a Frankenstein monster," notes Mr. Rizvi, "They've changed the direction of their guns from Afghanistan to Pakistan."

In numerous conversations with Pakistanis during our 10-day trip to Lahore for our nephew's wedding in August, most didn't talk about the rising tide of violence.

There's little outcry against the Taliban — as though atrocities are being committed in some faraway land instead of a mere 300 miles away in a region where armed religious extremists have set up a parallel government and imposed the strictest form of Islamic law.

Some see the war on terror as someone else's war, a war America has waged on Islam. Some believe the Taliban should be placated in case the country needs these warriors for its on-again, off-again conflict with India.

Much as in America, the economy and political future weigh on people's minds. Annual inflation tops an alarming 25 percent. Electricity outages have become so frequent that families buy generators. A fragile democracy appears to be in disarray following the resignation of President Pervez Musharraf, who overthrew the elected government in a bloodless coup nearly a decade ago.

Yet it's remarkable how the human spirit triumphs in the face of such uncertainty.

In nightly rehearsal sessions leading up to three days of elaborate wedding festivities, our nieces and nephews gathered around their cousin, Sarah, as she played the dholki, a traditional barrel-shaped drum, and led them in joyous wedding songs. They dressed our sons in sherwanis, long, embroidered coats, and khusssas, Aladdin-style shoes. As part of one offbeat ritual, they stole the groom's shoes and demanded he pay them or go barefoot.
This face of Pakistan — ordinary people finding joy in everyday moments — remains invisible to most of the world in the face of the militant extremism that now dominates the headlines.

As we bade emotional farewells to our family, our youngest son, Ali, impulsively gave an enormous bear hug to Tassaduq, the security guard quietly standing in the distance. We erupted in laughter. Caught off guard, Tassaduq broke into a wide smile.

That's one face of Pakistan I'll never forget.

— Teri Rizvi has written about life and politics in Pakistan since 1982. She's associate vice president for University communications at the University of Dayton. This piece appeared in The Christian Science Monitor on Sept. 22, 2008.