

The NS Interview

Malalai Joya, Afghan politician

“Obama is a warmonger, no different from Bush”

Portrait by Farzana Wahidy

What is your earliest memory?

I was only four days old when the Russian puppet regime was installed in Afghanistan [in 1978]. One of my earliest memories is of clinging to my mother's legs while police ransacked our house, looking for my father. They turned it upside down, emptying everything out of drawers, ripping open mattresses and pillows.

Do you still hope to return to the Afghan parliament?

Yes. I have challenged my illegal suspension in court, although in two years there has been no progress. But I still want to return, to raise the voice of my voiceless people and expose the parliament's reactionary nature from within.

Who are your political heroes?

My people, the suppressed millions. And anti-war protesters around the world. There is another superpower in the world besides the US government – world public opinion.

What inspires you to keep going?

The suffering of my people, especially women.

Do you live in fear, or hope?

Both. I fear that I will not live to see freedom for Afghanistan. But I have great hope that we will eventually be free, democratic and prosperous.

What do you believe the Afghanistan summit in London can achieve?

I don't expect anything positive from the London conference at all. Since 2001, there have been a number of conferences. They have only pushed Afghanistan further into the hands of the occupying forces and their local agents.

The conference will prepare the ground for the return to power of the Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Islamic Party. The Afghan government says it will ask the world leaders there to remove the name of Mullah Omar, the medieval Taliban leader, from the UN Security Council's blacklist. Common Afghans have no faith in such conferences.

What is your opinion of Hamid Karzai?

Among Afghans, a king called Shah Shuja is hated for being an agent of 19th-century British rule. When the Russians installed Babrak Karmal, he was called the second Shah Shuja. Karzai is the third, a US puppet who has also joined hands with our internal enemies.

What about Barack Obama?

Obama is a warmonger, no different from Bush. He came to power with corporate backers. They want him to continue the US's militarism and he obeys.

How has Afghanistan changed since the fall of the Taliban?

The US replaced the barbaric Taliban with the brutal Northern Alliance. This act betrayed human rights. The situation for women is as catastrophic today as it was before. In most provinces, women's lives are hell. Forced marriages, child brides and domestic violence are very common. Self-immolations is at a peak.

What security precautions do you have to take, now that your life is under threat?

I change homes often and can't have an office. I wear a burqa outside and travel with bodyguards, and I don't attend public meetings. But I still don't feel safe. I receive threats.

Do you think the majority of Afghan women support your view of the Karzai government?

Yes, I'm very sure they do. I am talking about women who are suffering and have no voice – they are completely ignored by the media, too.

Your critics say you don't represent them.

Most of my critics are warlords, Taliban or US puppets. They comprise a small minority, living luxurious lives in Kabul. From the occupation, they have gained wealth and fame. It is natural that such Afghans rise against me.

Don't polls show Afghan support for the western military presence?

This is not only a military war, but also a war of propaganda. A recent BBC survey said 70 per cent of Afghans think the country is headed in the right direction and 71 per cent support Karzai. Even animals make fun of the figures! If Karzai is so popular, why did he have to win the election by fraud?

You want foreign forces out – but what then?

Afghans face three enemies: the occupying forces, the Taliban and the warlords. When the US pulls out, the Taliban and the warlords will lose their guardian. It will be easier for Afghans to unite and crush these internal enemies.

Can democracy ever flourish in a tribal and conservative society such as Afghanistan?

Years of conflict have changed Afghanistan and its people's political knowledge has increased. It is the US and its puppets who try to give a bad name to democracy in Afghanistan.

What would you like to forget?

The cheap attacks of my enemies.

Are we all doomed?

No. We can change our destiny by our struggle and efforts. ●

Interview by Mehdi Hasan

Read a longer version of the conversation at: newstatesman.com/subjects/interviews

DEFINING MOMENTS

1978 Born in Farah, western Afghanistan

1982 Her family flees the country, living in refugee camps in Iran and later Pakistan

1998 Returns to Afghanistan, becoming a women's rights activist

2001 Sets up health centre and orphanage

2003 Becomes her country's youngest representative in parliament

2007 Suspended from parliament for three years for criticising colleagues

2009 Publishes a memoir, *Raising My Voice*

