

Afghanistan's Warlords Cannot Silence Malalai Joya

Written by Peter Rugh

Tuesday, 08 October 2013 00:00

[vice](#), Oct 8, 2013



Today marks the 12th anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan. The ongoing war, the longest in American history, has fallen from the forefront of the American public's consciousness. The US has turned its focus from the initial fronts in the war on terror—Afghanistan and subsequently Iraq—to fresh battlefields in Libya, Yemen, Pakistan, and Syria. But for Afghans, whose country remains divided between Taliban commandos and a government comprised largely of former warlords supported by US and NATO, violence remains an everyday reality.

On Friday, I caught up with Malalai Joya, an Afghan women's rights activist and former member of the country's parliament. Malalai was expelled from her post in 2007 for criticizing her fellow parliamentarians, leveling allegations of corruption against them, and calling them “sheep and donkeys.” She was told she could return if she apologized. Instead of saying sorry, she mused

Afghanistan's Warlords Cannot Silence Malalai Joya

Written by Peter Rugh

Tuesday, 08 October 2013 00:00

that she ought to apologize to the animals for comparing them to Afghanistan's lawmakers.

As a result of her vocal opposition to the Taliban and the US-sponsored regime in Afghanistan, Malalai has faced repeated attempts on her life. Currently she lives underground and does not travel without armed escorts. She remains a popular and divisive figure, beloved by some and loathed by others. Malalai is in the US on a speaking tour to mark the anniversary of the Afghanistan war and promoting her book [Woman Among Warlords](#), a biographical account of resisting occupation and organizing secret classes and clinics for women and girls under the Taliban. In this interview, we discussed the impending US withdrawal, Afghanistan's opium trade, education, women's rights, and what it is like to live under the boot of warlords. She also gave her thoughts on Syria, the latest object of US intervention.

VICE: What is it like to live with the fear of death on a day-to-day basis, to need bodyguards when you move from place to place?

Malalai Joya: It is difficult, especially for an activist, to live in a country with warlords in power. Unfortunately, I have to work underground for security reasons. Otherwise it is very easy to be a target. This is my only option. I won't compromise or be silent. I receive death threats and have to move from place to place. There have been seven assassination attempts on my life.

Once they put a bomb on a bridge. We were lucky that our car arrived just before the bomb exploded. Another time, they fired at a house where I was staying. I told my bodyguard to shoot in the air and at their feet but not to kill anybody and they escaped.

We have a saying in Afghanistan: "The mice are always in the wall." People are always listening and sometimes we are exposed and have to flee, but I understand the risks. I don't fear death. I fear silence against injustice. I'm not bitter toward my people. They suffer from poverty, insecurity, corruption, joblessness.

The people trying to silence you, are they Taliban or US-sponsored warlords—who is it?

If anything were to happen to me, both the Taliban and the warlords would be happy. It's easy

Afghanistan's Warlords Cannot Silence Malalai Joya

Written by Peter Rugh

Tuesday, 08 October 2013 00:00

for the Taliban to take credit, to say, "We did this," and pretend they are more powerful than they are. But it's not only the Taliban. In Parliament, I received threats face to face.

Yet, you've described opium as even more dangerous to Afghanistan, and Afghan women in particular, than the Taliban or the warlords. Could you explain?

You can fight terrorism, but it is difficult to escape from opium. Girls 16 years old and younger [are offered as brides](#) when their families do not have enough to give the warlords. It destroys the lives of women and girls who are addicted to it. The government says to farmers, "Stop growing opium." But the provincial governors and the [Minister of Counter narcotics](#) drug traffickers.

We have plenty of land. We don't need opium. My home province, Farah, could grow enough wheat to spread all over Afghanistan if the government would help us irrigate so we can bring in water for our crops

You are critical of the US and the regime it is supporting, but I read recently that 40 percent of Afghan girls are now going to school, up from zero before the occupation. I know women's rights gains have mainly been concentrated in the capitol, but isn't that an improvement?

It would be good if what the media says were true. But hundreds of schools have been closed for lack of security and teachers have been kidnapped, raped, and even beheaded. In Kabul, many teachers haven't received their salary for months and there have been [hunger strikes](#) at the university. In the northern provinces, many girls were [recently poisoned](#)

There are many examples of girls who've had acid thrown on their faces or been kidnapped and raped on their way to school but it never gets reported. When we are ruled by misogynists and warlords, how can we expect that education for girls will improve? They know educated women have their own identities.

We have a strange situation in Afghanistan. Twenty-five percent of seats in parliament are held

Afghanistan's Warlords Cannot Silence Malalai Joya

Written by Peter Rugh

Tuesday, 08 October 2013 00:00

by women and we have women running countless NGOs. But these women are NGO-lords. They have gotten fame and wealth from the occupation, from this puppet Mafia regime.

Lots of money for learning goes into the pockets of looters. Still, people are putting their hopes in education. Recently, I went to Herat province, to a school under a tent where girls are studying. But these small, positive changes that have been made are used to justify the occupation while in rural areas the situation is the same. Some people say it is worse than when the Taliban was in power. It's double the misery. Before it was just the Taliban bombing and killing. Now, it is the Taliban and the warlords.

Are you worried that when the US withdraws there'll be a civil war? And what are some ways Afghan women can defend themselves and gain civil rights?

Behind the talk of the civil war is the propaganda hand of the US and NATO. They want people to accept their military bases for protection. But I believe that the future civil war they are talking about will not be worse than the civil war that is already going on in my country. If the US really stops empowering these warlords who have been imposed on us under the cloak of democracy, people will rise up and demand justice. They will fight steadfastly.

You think people will rise up?

Yes. Day by day we are witnessing protests. The media talks about Taliban resistance to the US occupation. But there's a huge difference between the resistance of the Taliban and the resistance of ordinary peace-loving Afghans. People are tired. They don't have enough to eat. Some would sell their babies for ten dollars. They don't have much education. It will take time. But they are resisting. That's why I am not leaving Afghanistan. Only we can liberate ourselves, through self-determination. We have a prideful history and have never accepted occupation. As the brutality of the US and fundamentalists rises, more people will rise against them.

How do you feel about the peace negotiations underway right now? You've been critical of [plans](#) to invite the Taliban to the bargaining table. But the Taliban control much of southern Afghanistan. Isn't it necessary for peace to include them in a coalition government?

Afghanistan's Warlords Cannot Silence Malalai Joya

Written by Peter Rugh

Tuesday, 08 October 2013 00:00

In some war-torn countries, after the war, it is a good idea to invite terrorists to the round table to talk to them and to try to find reconciliation. But in a country like Afghanistan, where a group of terrorists are in power, to invite another group of terrorists to help bring peace is ridiculous. It is a painful joke. The result will be more bloodshed, more violence. It will unite the killers. Peace without justice, without independence is meaningless. This peace would be for the US and the heroes would be criminals. If we want peace, first we must ask the people what kind of peace they want. They want to prosecute these criminals.

In America, most people aren't sure why we are in Afghanistan. Our government says we are combating terrorism, but you see our motives as sinister.

Afghanistan is in the heart of Asia. Through Afghanistan they can control other Asian powers—China, Iran, Russia... They have easy access to the gas and oil of central-Asian republics and can exploit the [natural resources](#) have—copper, uranium, and lithium. September 11th gave the US an excuse to invade. Now, we're part of their long-term geopolitical strategy. The same thing is happening again. Under the umbrella of the UN, they've gone into Libya. They are interfering in Syria. They are waging war for their own interests.

There's a big debate in the US right now about intervention in Syria, of possibly launching missile strikes. Some lawmakers even want to invade. As someone from a country where the US has intervened, what do you make of the situation over there?

When I watch news of Syria, it reminds me of Afghanistan. Warlords are looting the country, turning it to ashes. And now the US is giving weapons to these fundamentalists. The US wants to bring puppets to power, just like in Afghanistan. Out of the muddy water in Syria, they want to catch fishes for themselves. The people of Syria, unfortunately, will witness darker days ahead. But only the Syrian people can liberate themselves.

What gives you hope for your country?

Any place where there is cruelty and oppression, there is resistance, too. We must follow the example of Samad Behrangi who said, "Death could very easily come any moment now, but I

Afghanistan's Warlords Cannot Silence Malalai Joya

Written by Peter Rugh

Tuesday, 08 October 2013 00:00

will not be the one to seek it. If it comes, it will not matter. What matters is whether my life or death has an impact on the lives of others." I know I am walking in the right direction when I receive the support of hungry people, suffering people. The warlords can destroy all the flowers but they cannot stop the spring. One day we will win.