

A Woman Among Warlords: An Interview With Malalai Joya

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By Suzanne Persard, [Huffington Post](#) , Oct 25, 2013

Most publications incorrectly report the number of assassination attempts Malalai Joya has received -- the number is seven, not six; and these are only the number of plots that have been counted.

In 2007, Joya, the youngest elected member to the Afghan parliament, was expelled from the government for her denunciation of incumbent corrupt warlords. The then 28-year-old Joya advocated for women's rights, spoke out against the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and their locally installed puppets, while deeming the Taliban medieval. Death threats against her immediately erupted, followed by several unsuccessful assassination attempts by the Taliban.

Following her indefinite expulsion from a parliament she has likened to a "non-democratic mafia," Joya's unpopularity, which surged at home, spread like wildfire abroad. Applying for entry to the U.S. in 2011 to promote her newly released book, *A Woman Among Warlords*, while continuing to speak out against the U.S. occupation and its devastating impact on the Afghan people, the State Department denied her entry, citing "unemployment" and "living underground." Public rallying, including a petition of over 3,000 signatures -- including the signature of Noam Chomsky -- prompted the department to renege and her visa was granted.

Joya, who appeared in New York City for a series of speaking engagements earlier in October, is easily confused with another similar-sounding activist: 14-year-old Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan, who also survived a Taliban assassination attempt, but has received much more attention from American news outlets. While Yousafzai was headlined on every major American news channel, Joya's presence in the U.S. was relatively unnoticed. Although the State Department granted two visas, only one could serve as justification for Western intervention and serve as the voice for oppressed Muslim women everywhere.

But Joya has never subscribed to an imperialist narrative that places the U.S. as the sole liberator of the Afghan people. She has refused to be another poster-child for wars waged under the false banner of Western liberation, and is quick to name the U.S. and NATO as committing the same violences against women as the Taliban and local warlords.

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From the backseats of Afghan taxicabs to the lips of warlords, Joya's name echoing throughout Afghanistan wavers from a source of danger and derision, to one of hope. While advocating for women's rights and an end to gender-based violence, Joya continues to receive death threats as survivors of sexual violence and their families seek her support. Unapologetically naming the misogyny and patriarchy plaguing the Afghan government and religious fundamentalists, Joya continues her activism and lives under the radar for her safety.

Despite the atrocities of the Taliban, a twelve-year war, and struggles against gender-based violence, Joya spoke with me about why she refuses to relinquish her fight for a free Afghanistan.

You've openly called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and you've said, "In history, only the people can liberate themselves." Do you believe a democratic revolution in Afghanistan is possible?

In my country, it takes time, but [through] the resistance of ordinary Afghan people, students of the universities, democratic-minded intellectuals, and some [political] parties that we have rising more and more against fascism of the occupiers like the U.S. and NATO, and their lackeys, puppets, the warlords, and Taliban -- more people [now] stand up against them. But it takes time because millions of Afghans -- more than 80 percent of them -- suffer from poverty and they live below the poverty line. They suffer from injustice, joblessness, corruption, poverty. Lack of education is another problem for most people, especially women. [Women] are still the most victims and targets; many violences occur against them.

Many example like this [indicate] that it takes time especially that these reactionary terrorists, misogynists, warlords are in power, and even indirectly the Taliban, control Afghanistan. They create more obstacles, challenges, risks -- especially for democratic activists, whose role is very important in society. Despite all of these risks, obstacles, and challenges, we are very active in trying to bring positive changes, especially values like democracy, human rights, and women's rights. But today in Afghanistan, we do not have even caricature of democracy.

An uprising of people is a source of hope... The only wish of the Afghans is justice. They demand justice. But they are opposed by the U.S. and NATO, and the occupied Afghanistan. People are tired, wounded, and hate all kinds of these terrorists. But they will stand up one day more and more against them.

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Throughout the world you've made an incredible impact as a woman speaking out against gender-based violence and against the oppression that women endure. Have you witnessed more women are speaking out because of your leadership, or do you think they are reluctant to speak out because of the backlash you've experienced for speaking out?

I can say both, because when I stood up ten years ago in 2003 I made a speech and exposed the mask of these criminals publicly in Afghanistan and now it's internationally [known]. At that time, my life fell at-risk, but I received a lot of support from millions of Afghans because most of them they are sufferers. They agree that these criminals should be prosecuted. After these [last] ten years, what I said came true: this taboo of silence broke, and I witnessed people supported and encouraged me for standing up and exposing the masks, which nobody dared to do.

Now I see more people standing up and publicly expose [corruption]. What I was saying ten years ago, now they are saying. This is our hope for the future.

But I want to say, do not misunderstand that I am the one who gives them courage; I am not the only one. There are many other activists -- brave activists. They are risking their lives, they are encouraging the people. I do my responsibility, just like them.

Earlier this year, the Afghan parliament decreased the number of seats reserved from women from 25 percent to 20 percent. Do you believe these women have real political power?

Those women in parliament have power but unfortunately, they don't use their power in the right way. As the majority of seats in parliament belong to these warlords, drug lords, criminals, and even Taliban, and only 20 percent belong to women, most of these women have a symbolic role -- they are pro-warlords, pro-occupation. They can never be representative of the women and men of Afghanistan.

I remember, when I was in parliament, one fundamentalist women threatened me to date and told me, if I do not sit silent, will do something against me that no man dare to do.

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How would you respond to those who have said that your speaking out has negatively impacted the situation for women in Afghanistan by resulting in an overall setback for women? For example, the parliament's decision to decrease the number of seats allocated for women could be interpreted as a direct result of more women speaking out against gender-based oppression.

No, I never agree with this kind of propaganda while [much propaganda] against me from small-minded people [exists] -- pro-warlords, pro-occupation men and women. For example, they have said, 'She wants fame,' or, 'She discourages other women,' etc. All I can say is it's political weakness to raise this propaganda. Since I've stood up [to protest at parliament], more and more people have come to me, especially the women. As I am [living] underground, they come asking for support for raising their voice.

For example, 16-year-old Shekila, who was been brutally raped by warlords -- [by] a member of the provincial council -- was shot and killed. Three other parliamentarians tried to forge the medical report of the raped girl. This poor victim's family came to me to support their voices morally, and even financially, because they do not have enough money to hire a lawyer to defend them. Another raped girl came to me asking for support and one of my bodyguards rescued her life. I followed her case, and many cases like [of the victims' families] not only the raped girls -- those families who lost their dear ones by blind bombardment of the occupiers or terrorist Taliban, or warlords -- they come in asking for support for raising their voice internationally, and also in Afghanistan.

In light of U.S. occupation and all the pressures faced internally through misogyny, the government corruption, warlords in parliament, the continued Taliban presence, what is it that still gives you hope to keep speaking out, to keep fighting and continue your activism?

There are different reasons give us hope -- first, the self is enough to encourage us. We have a proud history that has never accepted occupation. The resistance of ordinary Afghan people, students of the universities, democratic-minded parties like the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan -- each time they organize demonstrations against occupiers, against the dictator regime of Iran, and also the Taliban and warlords, against these terrorists -- hundreds of thousands of people join these demonstrations. This is giving us hope.

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And when we see from inside of the American army some great people like Bradley Manning, Edward Snowden, and many others like them [who] are standing up to expose the war crime of their machine, the war crime of their government -- [this] itself is a source of hope. They are living in the hearts of millions of oppressed people of the world.

Also justice-loving people of the world, including in the U.S., against the economic crisis, against these warmongers, itself is another source of hope. In this decade of war, we almost lost everything, but we got one positive thing, which is the political consciousness of poor, uneducated people of Afghanistan.; that itself is a hope. That is my message to justice-loving people around the world: the bravery of my people, these youths and these victims' families, that they do not sit silent anymore -- especially these raped girls and other victims' families -- [that] they raise their voices and receive threats but do not sit silent -- is also hope.