

Interview: Undaunted, Undeterred, Afghan Activist Eludes Assassination, Fights On

Written by MINTPRESSNEWS
Friday, 07 February 2014 00:00

“It really is a big problem just to be alive,” said 35-year-old Afghan activist Malalai Joya.

By Tracy Lee, [MINTPRESSNEWS](#) , Feb 7, 2014



Female Afghan lawmaker, Malalai Joya, sits in a living room during an interview with The Associated Press in Kabul, Afghanistan, Saturday, May 13, 2006. Malalai Joya, a female Afghan lawmaker who two years ago called powerful armed leaders “criminals” and who last week on parliament floor called some lawmakers warlords now moves houses every night because of an influx of death threats, she said. (AP Photo /Rodrigo Abd)

NEW YORK — She goes by Joya—a name used since the early days of the Taliban—and has survived seven assassination attempts. She knows her days are numbered but does not fear death. Traveling with a few armed bodyguards in Afghanistan’s underground of hideaway locations, she moves from safe house to safe house every few days so that she can continue her cause.

Interview: Undaunted, Undeterred, Afghan Activist Eludes Assassination, Fights On

Written by MINTPRESSNEWS
Friday, 07 February 2014 00:00

“It’s not easy as a human being. It really is a big problem just to be alive,” Joya said in a recent telephone interview with MintPress.

A former Afghan parliamentarian and fierce advocate for human rights, Joya is an outspoken critic of her government and of the foreign troops on her home soil. She offers no apologies for her bluntness, even at the expense of her life.

To her enemies, which include the Taliban and many of the higher tiers of the Afghan parliament, Joya is a difficult adversary—a moving target who has managed to escape intimidation by top Afghan officials, including former female colleagues, violent sabotage in the parliamentary hallways and failed ambushes.



(Photo/DCMJ)

“It also makes me very sad when I think about it as a human facing these risks and challenges and living with this fear that maybe these terrorists find the place. I wish they only damage me, but I worry about those who I will be at their house for a few days ... I really worry about their life, but when I see the support of my supporters—these Afghan, these innocent Afghan, these victim families—are my power,” Joya said.

A controversial figure since 2003 when she fought her way up to give a three-minute speech as the then youngest delegate from Farah province at the Loya Jirga, or grand assembly, in Kabul, Joya questioned the legitimacy of the assembly with its presence of criminals, Taliban and warlords, who she claimed were backed by the U.S.

Cut off and ushered out as the scene erupted with anger, she was moving fast on the frontlines among a growing list of enemies. From that moment, she would never be able to walk around as openly as she had done before.

An early voice

Paralleling her life-long struggles with foreign occupation and advocacy from the start, Joya was born in the Anardara district of western Afghanistan, a few days after the pro-Soviet coup to a namesake in a symbolic nod to her country's iconic heroine, Malalai of Maiwand. A veil of hope for Afghans today facing defeat, Malalai rallied fighters in a decisive battle during the 2nd Anglo-Afghan War.

Her father's exile as a human rights activist defined much of her childhood. While memories of his absence continue to stir her, they formed an early impression about the types of personal sacrifices attached to this lifestyle. Joya would later make similar choices when she married and had a child.

Her subsequent journey as a refugee from a young child in Iran at 4-years-old and then to Pakistan to escape the Soviet war in Afghanistan gave her insight into the inequality.

"Being a refugee impacted a lot on my life," Joya said, but she considers the experience a major guiding point in her advocacy work. "When I was in high school, I decided to teach to make an income to support my family. This was where I engaged with my oppressed people who have told me about their difficult life and shared their sorrows with me, which were very painful for me as a young girl."

In the Pakistani refugee camps where Joya was a teacher to all ages, including her mother, she came into contact with the newly formed Organization of Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities. Working to improve educational prospects for women and girls, its mission in Afghanistan's western Herat resonated with her. In defiance of a Taliban ban on education for women, OPAWC sought classes for girls, and Joya quickly jumped at the chance to work with them as a full-time activist.

Having been to Afghanistan once since being a refugee, Joya returned wearing a burka—the very symbol of oppression—and one that she described as “a shroud for dead bodies.” In stark contrast, the burka provided respite at times, acting as a shield and transporter of the hidden books she was carrying back and forth from her home to her job.

Operating clandestinely out of supporters’ basements, she taught girls of all grade levels.

“As you know about the dark regime of Taliban, every minute people were waiting for a new incident, and they were against women education. To get education in such situations were very difficult and dangerous. I always used to tell my students to not come in groups as Taliban would know about our class easily. Despite insisting to not come in groups, sometimes the students were coming in groups, which exposed our classes [and] created problems for us not only security wise, but also made us to change houses, which was wasting a lot of time,” Joya said.

Under such restrictions, Joya found that she was becoming even more invigorated. Discovering her own voice in social injustice, she could see firsthand the direct power she had on the girls through education. Otherwise misinformed, she could instill a whole new life of knowledge, allowing them opportunities and possibilities to break from repression.

An eventual stint as the OPAWC director in western Afghanistan in 2001 led Joya back to her childhood western province of Farah in remote areas lacking resources. Managing to open a free medical clinic after initial resistance and then an orphanage, she became exposed to deeper and newer realms of Afghan plights that later led her to take on a more public persona.

An early voice

“Several assassination attempts and death threats, which are still continuing, can’t stop my struggle,” she said. “As always, I say that I do not fear death; I fear political silence against injustice.”

Feeling a special kinship to her people, particularly for the people in Farah who Joya developed close bonds with, she knew she needed a bigger push to get her voice out.

A seat in the new Afghani Parliament would grant her the audience she needed, but it would come at a price, certain to be marred with risks that her supporters would bear as well.

Joya continued to rely on the very thing she hated—her blue burka—to protect her identity out in the open. But for security reasons, she wasn't able to attend many of her own campaign events and would often meet supporters in confinement.

The path to a parliamentary seat was just the beginning. Once winning the seat, she said it proved to be a battle in itself to arrive at work alive. But despite the daily hazards, it was those chances that she was willing to take.

Peers worked to sabotage her work, and Joya was eventually expelled from the new Afghani Parliament in 2007 for public criticism against the lawmaking body—just two years after becoming the youngest person elected.

But the damage was done, and her voice continues to be heard. She knows she is marked on the hit lists of famed groups and individuals, realizing her last days could be approaching, but she never dwells.

“My enemies may be able to eliminate me one day, but they cannot ever silence my voice- they cannot hide the truth of real democracy, genuine justice, women's rights and human rights,” she said, adding that “there's more Malalais, more freedom-loving fighters [out there to take my spot].”