

## 'I spoke the truth and the truth has a powerful voice'

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Joya: "I will be alive or not. But I hope. I wish to be alive next to my people, to enjoy freedom and democracy in our country. One day we will have it. Yes, I am sure."

Roger Arnold, [The National Newspaper](#) , May 26, 2010



**Seven years ago, Malalai Joya stood up and challenged the warlords of Afghanistan. Since then she has lived in the shadows, under constant threat of death. Yet still her campaign for justice goes on, and her name is spreading around the world. *Roger Arnold* meets her.**

On December 17, 2003, a young woman stood up from the back rows of Afghanistan's constitutional Loya Jirga, or grand assembly, and demanded to speak. "My name is Malalai Joya from Farah Province. With the permission of all those present, by the name of God and in respect of the martyrs of the path to freedom, I would like to speak. My criticism of all my compatriots is why are they allowing the legitimacy and legality of this loya jirga to come under question with the presence of those criminal warlords who brought our country to this state... They are anti-women and have ruined our country... They should be prosecuted in national and international courts ... If they are forgiven by our people, the barefooted Afghan people, our history will never forgive them."

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This moment changed her life for ever. Joya, 25, had directly challenged warlords, including Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, reported to be on the CIA payroll following the American invasion and an alleged mentor to Osama bin Laden.

Sayyaf and other furious delegates forced the speaker to expel Joya. She was applauded by some delegates and assaulted by others, as supporters surrounded her to provide protection.

Joya says: "When I went there for the first time in my life, I saw those criminals who I heard a lot about for long years, I had to say something."

Joya's courage electrified the Afghan people. Suddenly she was the most famous woman in the country.

But her outspokenness has cost her dearly. Five attempts have been made on her life, the latest in June last year. She now lives in hiding and rarely appears in public. Instead, she continues her work from a series of safe houses, in dark rooms, with the curtains drawn. She wears a burqa to conceal her identity and is constantly surrounded by armed guards.

Like all Afghans, Joya's life has never been normal. Four days after her birth the army of the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Her father, a medical student, joined the mujahideen and lost a leg fighting the Soviet occupation.

Joya became a refugee with her family in Iran. After four years they moved to Pakistan where the refugee camps offered education. She worked with an NGO, teaching refugees, and became an activist.

In 1998, during Taliban rule she returned to Afghanistan, setting up a school with the women's underground movement in Herat Province. In 2000, she moved to her native Farah Province and opened an office and clinic. After the US invasion she became the youngest member of the Afghan parliament.

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Hidden in a once prosperous neighbourhood of homes destroyed by bombing, lined with blast walls and razor wire, friends come to see her one at a time or in small groups.

On the morning I am there, Joya sits surrounded by 13 women who run private orphanages. She has never met them. It is risky allowing them in. A young girl breaks the tension and says: "We are not afraid if they kill us. It is better than how they treat us alive. We must say the truth. I am not afraid if I have to stand up to these fundamentalists. Please Joya, run for president – we will vote for you. We support you. Don't feel you are alone."

Joya is no longer visible to the Afghan public. She claims there is a conspiracy against her, an allegation difficult to refute. In a TV interview she compared the parliament to a stable of animals, although she says her remarks were taken out of context in the editing.

On May 21, 2007, the lower house of the Afghan parliament voted to suspend her for "insulting" them. Two months before her suspension, her enemies in the parliament also passed a controversial limited amnesty bill shielding themselves from alleged war crimes.

The Supreme Court has not responded to Joya's appeals, and Human Rights Watch (HRW) has called her suspension illegal. "Instead of branding her a criminal, the Afghan government should be demanding that parliament reinstate Malalai and arresting the people threatening her life," said HRW's Brad Adams.

"This is a real test for president Hamid Karzai to show donors that women – even outspoken women – have a role to play in Afghan politics and in the rebuilding of Afghanistan."

Joya's reinstatement appears unlikely. In May 2009 her defence lawyer went before a parliamentary complaints commission. She claims they even threatened him with death, suggesting he was a young man and he should think about that.

They told him: "We didn't punish her as we wished. We must punish her with the Kalashnikov."

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Despite the threats, Joya plans to run again for parliament in September's elections. Aside from her safety, her main concern is electoral fraud. She says, "What matters is not who is voting, but who is counting".

Joya's fame has increased as an international figure. Ignoring a travel ban, she has spoken in Europe and North America and received many awards. Last month Time magazine named her as one of the 100 "World's Most Influential People".

Celebrities have presented Joya with many international honours, but she struggles with their names. "Hilary? Umm... Hilary? Oh yes, Hilary Swank. I'm sorry. You must understand. It is difficult for me to remember all their names. I am embarrassed."

Last year, she published a memoir based on her diaries: *A Woman Among Warlords: The Extraordinary Story Of An Afghan Who Dared To Raise Her Voice*. Joya says she was reluctant to write the book. In person she is loath to talk about herself. "You know I appreciate these awards and my international supporters. I am very grateful to them. But even when I am travelling, my heart is with my people. How can I smile when they are suffering?"

Joya dedicates her biography to ordinary Afghans, the ones who have no voice, who suffer in silence. Proceeds from the book will go to humanitarian projects in Afghanistan, including the clinic she helped start. "I wrote the truth to expose the mask of these warlords," she says. "They are trying to throw dust in the eyes of the great people around the world."

At lunch, surrounded by 10 friends and family, Joya is more at ease. The conversation remains on politics. None of them wants to be quoted or photographed. Association with Joya is dangerous.

Sitting in a circle on the floor, they pass around huge plates of mutton pulao, vegetables, bread and Coca-Cola.

The room is dark. Opposite Joya sits a tall slender young Afghan woman. Dressed in a flowing white headscarf and a rebellious pair of blue jeans, she breaks the news: "I won an international

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scholarship to study abroad.”

Joya exclaims: “What? No, you cannot leave me. We need you here. I love her; she is like my sister. Afghanistan needs her. Promise me you will return after your study.”

Joya’s fears are well-founded. Many educated Afghans have left. Joya first realised the value of education teaching fellow refugees in Pakistan. “They had babies and wanted to feed them. They were very poor, suffering women. After their education they started to support their family. I saw many changes in their lives.”

Joya taught her mother too, admitting: “Mum said she was too old for school. But I said ‘No Mum, I have some students the same age as you. Education does not depend on age’.” She laughs, before adding: “I couldn’t yell at her to be quiet or scold her for skipping class.”

Joya could easily gain refugee status in Europe or the US, but she is determined to remain. “Some Afghans tell me it is better to leave than to be here. One day when the situation gets a little better I can come back. They don’t want the warlords to kill me, but I don’t want to leave.

“I believe one day they will kill me, but they cannot silence this voice and cannot hide the truth. One day we will win. I am trying my best next to my people.”

Not every Afghan agrees with her. Mohammed works for an NGO in Kabul driving an armoured Land Cruiser. He says: “Joya and the media, they only talk about the bad things. Look at this new road we are driving on. There are new businesses, many things are improving, too. Joya never talks about this.”

The new road he refers to, the Jalalabad road, linking Kabul to Islamabad, is a significant improvement. However, it is regularly ambushed by insurgents and suicide bombers. Each time Joya travels, she faces these hazards, one reason the BBC refers to her as the “bravest woman in Afghanistan”.

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On October 6, 2008, Natasha Esemirova presented Joya with the Anna Politkovskaya award, given by the Reach All Women in War human rights organisation in memory of the murdered Russian reporter. Esemirova was the first recipient of the award in 2007 for her work exposing abuses in Chechnya. Joya says when she handed her the bronze statue, Esemirova said: "Malalai be brave. Those who raise their voice – they will always try to silence them."

On July 15, 2009, Esemirova was abducted and murdered in Chechnya, leaving Joya and the "Iranian One Million Signatures Campaign" as the only surviving recipients of the award.

Joya remains undeterred. Asked what she would say to Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, or the US president Barack Obama, she says: "It's not important the sex, man or woman. It is important what they are doing, what they are thinking about and their ideas... War itself is a crime as you see what they did in Iraq and Afghanistan." She continues: "Every day the US is spending \$100 million for war. If this went for education we would be much better off. Education is the key to emancipation."

Joya, like most Afghans, is outraged by air strikes that continue to hit innocent civilians. "Bombing is a war crime. If [the war planes] bombed the wedding party of Obama, he would not stand for it. The blood of Afghans is worth the same as Americans and others."

She is disappointed in the Obama administration for "continuing the failed policies of Bush".

Her main complaint is that the US has replaced one group of "warlords and fundamentalist criminals" – the Taliban – with another: the Northern Alliance. She maintains it would be easier for Afghans to achieve peace if the US empowered "real democrats" and says it is impossible to have fair elections under the shadow of a "mafia who control the ballots".

She adds: "I want to tell Hillary Clinton that eight years of war by the US have done nothing to help women. If she wants to help then there should be no compromise with the Taliban or these warlords who are in power. Killing of women is like the killing of a bird for them. I am a perfect example. They expel me from parliament for speaking the truth. Is this the democracy the US government supports?"

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Joya says it is the responsibility of her own people to fight for their rights, a struggle she admits could be painful.

"But I trust in my people. I strongly believe no nation can donate liberation to another." She says the assertion that Afghanistan will descend into civil war if Nato leaves is hollow: "We already have a civil war."

In the afternoon, Joya receives her last visitor. Recognising Joya's face, the little girl runs into her open arms, giving her a huge hug. Overwhelmed, Joya says: "Oh my God! She is so cute."

Seven-year-old Shikiba and her uncle are fighting for her rights in court. Two men raped Shikiba a year ago. Her uncle tells Joya that he is furious with the lack of justice in the courts. "The two accused rapists are free and threaten me to kill me for filing charges against them. I had to leave my province."

Holding Shikiba in her arms, Joya reads over medical documents from the hospital. Her eyes become glassy with tears. She tells them not to be intimidated. Shikiba's case represents what Joya and Afghans are so frustrated about. Joya exclaims: "You see? Today we have no justice. It is jungle law."

"You know it is not good for me to cry in front of my supporters, it will have a negative impact on them. In bad moments of personal problems I try to be alone. I am like many other women, I am human." She is keenly aware she may face assassination, but remains resolute. "I spoke the truth and truth itself has a powerful voice. It is like the sun. I think nobody can hide the sun. One day truth will find its deserved place, I am sure. I will be alive or not. But I hope. I wish to be alive next to my people, to enjoy freedom and democracy in our country. One day we will have it. Yes, I am sure."

The sun begins to disappear. "Darkness is coming. Due to security, I have to leave this house. It is not safe for me or my supporters living here. I must leave." Her security team prepares, working their radios and mobile phones, making last-minute preparations. She moves between curtained rooms gathering her belongings.

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A mullah's voice wails from a distant mosque, calling Muslims to pray. Standing before a hallway mirror Joya slips a blue burqa over her head. She hugs the supporter whose home she sheltered in for the day. Then, surrounded by three men with machine guns, she slips into the night.