

Afghanistan: 'The truth cannot be killed'

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“The situation for women in Afghanistan today is like hell”, Afghan feminist, pro-democracy activist and illegally suspended parliamentarian Malalai Joya told *Green Left Weekly*

For Joya, who is currently touring Australia to promote her political autobiography *Raising My Voice*, it is a familiar situation.

She grew up in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. She returned to Afghanistan in 1998 to engage in the extremely dangerous activity of conducting underground classes for girls. Female education was banned by the misogynist Taliban, then in power.

This makes her assessment of Afghanistan today, more than seven years after it was supposedly liberated by the US-led invasion, particularly damning.

Misogynist government

The invasion was carried out “in the name of human rights and women’s rights”. However, Joya said: “The US has imposed the Northern Alliance fundamentalists on our people. They are the criminal mujaheddin from the 1992-96 civil war with the same mentality as the Taliban, but with suits and ties talking about democracy.”

The mujaheddin combined violent and misogynist religious fundamentalism with violent and misogynist banditry, with mass rape their favoured military tactic. This made the civil war period as dark as the Taliban rule that followed.

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"We do not have liberation", Joya said. "These Taliban were created by the US ... in the religious schools in Pakistan, with the support of Saudi Arabia, but the Northern Alliance is also the product of the US government.

"In the Cold War, they wasted lots of money on them as puppets, but they became like mice when the Taliban came to power. They just crept into their holes.

"But after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US again made them wolves —in the skin of lambs to deceive the world.

"The democratic parties are not able to publish magazines, they are underground.

"Today, under the eyes of thousands of US and other foreign soldiers, the main problem for women — and men — is security. The prominent case of Pervez Kambakhsh is enough to know about injustice in Afghanistan."

Kambakhsh is a student who, in 2007, was arrested for downloading an article on women's rights. "They put him in jail and announced he'll be hanged", Joya told *GLW*.

Protests in Afghanistan and worldwide resulted in a sentence of 20 years jail instead — "while criminals are free".

Parliament of warlords

Joya's reputation from her underground work during the Taliban's rule enabled her to be elected to the *Loya Jirga*, the constituent assembly convoked by the occupation forces in 2003.

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However, this assembly was dominated by appointed warlords and their lackies. Joya gained worldwide recognition for a speech at the Loya Jirga demanding these criminals be brought to justice.

“Unfortunately, there were some democrats there but they didn’t raise their voices. Of course, most people are afraid of these warlords and criminals.

“But I spoke because even if I am killed, the voice of the people telling the truth cannot be silenced.



“I was sure that democratic people would support me. Today I am alive because of people’s support. In Farah they attacked my house and my orphanage, but shopkeepers, people on the street, arrived and defended it.

“This support gives me responsibility, but also strength and hope. These 30 years in Afghanistan, we almost lost everything but we gained one thing which means a lot. Political knowledge and consciousness.

“Now the people know who is our enemy and who is our friend.”

The speech made her dangerous enemies. She has since suffered five assassination attempts.

Despite seeing both the burqa and guns as symbolising oppression in Afghanistan, to stay

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alive Joya has to be disguised in a burqa and accompanied by armed supporters.

She never sleeps in the same house twice and goes long periods without seeing her family or husband.

Despite this, her sense of responsibility to the Afghan people has meant she has rejected the advice of foreign supporters to go into exile.

However, she is modest about her courage. "We have many Malalai Joyas in Afghanistan, nobody knows them.

"The only difference between them and me is fame."

Elected to parliament in 2005, she was barred in 2007 for "slandering" other parliamentarians. She had described the warlords as zoo animals.

In her book, she wryly comments that perhaps she was guilty of slandering zoo animals.

Since then, she has made regular trips overseas to tell the world the truth about her country. While calling for war criminals to be brought to justice, whether Taliban or aligned with the US-installed government of President Hamid Karzai, she is keen to stress that the Western media image of Afghans being backward, violent fundamentalists is false.

She cited her widespread support among ordinary Afghans, men as well as women.

Foreign troops must leave

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When visiting the West, Joya is frequently asked whether a Western troop withdrawal would mean a further descent into civil war and allow the Taliban to return to power. She rejected this reasoning.

"This is what the media want to make people think", she told *GLW*. "But what's going on today is like civil war. People are squashed today between two enemies: an internal and an external enemy ...

"That's why its better if the foreign troops leave as soon as possible. People are saying: we don't expect anything good from you, just stop your wrongdoing.

"Bombs falling from the sky are killing our people. On the ground, the Northern Alliance and Taliban are killing our people. From both sides our people are the victims — especially women and children."

She cited a May 4 US air-strike in her native Farah province. "The mainstream media wants to throw dust in the eyes of the world. Over 150 people were killed. I spoke to a young woman who lost 20 members of her own family.

"This was a massacre. I was banned from giving a press conference. But the US government and media said only 20 were killed.

"Our people hate warlords, don't support Karzai and his puppet government of war criminals and drug lords who now want to negotiate with the Taliban. Our people hate the Taliban.

"If the troops withdraw, then it is easier fight with one enemy. Now we are fighting with two enemies: occupation forces and these criminals.

"A superpower like Russia could not occupy our country, and the US, whose occupation is a war crime and a mockery of democracy, one day they will face the resistance of my people.

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Despite the lack of security, after the Farah massacre there were demonstrations in Farah and of students in Kabul — huge demonstrations of people from all provinces.

“No democratic party was behind them, people themselves went out.”

Joya called for solidarity from ordinary people in the occupying countries. “No country can donate liberation to another country. It is our responsibility to bring values like democracy, human rights and women’s rights.

“But with this catastrophic situation we need the helping hand of democratic men and women throughout the world. We don’t want occupation.

“And the families [in the West] who’ve lost loved ones [in Afghanistan] should raise their voices against the wrong policies of their government as these troops are also victims of these policies. To those families I offer condolences ... but they must raise their voices against the wrong policies of your governments.

“For example, Australia has for seven years followed the US, sending millions of dollars and troops to the shed their blood.”

She was sceptical about the US-led occupying coalition’s stated war aims. “In seven years the US has not destroyed the Taliban ... They just play a game of Tom and Jerry with these terrorists.

“They occupied Iraq because of oil, while they occupied Afghanistan for its geopolitical location. When they have military bases in Afghanistan it makes it easier to assert control against Iran, China, Russia, etc.

“That’s why they keep the situation dangerous, to have a reason to have troops stay longer in Afghanistan. It is just a drama, the War on Terror drama.

"If they catch Osama bin Laden or [Taliban leader] Mullah Omar then this game would be finished. But they don't want that."

She pointed out that the US forces kill five civilians for every Taliban they kill. She also said during the occupation, illegal narcotics production has risen by a staggering 4500%.

Aiding warlords

The West has spent US\$18 billion on development aid in Afghanistan since 2001. Joya told *GLW* why this has not prevented poverty from increasing: "Most NGOs are corrupt. Most of the money from the international community went into the pockets of NGO-lords, warlords, drug lords, officials and the donors themselves."

On August 20, Karzai is up for re-election. He has chosen two notorious warlords, Mohammed Qasim Fahim and Karim Khalili, as his vice-presidential running mates.

While the Western media is describing the elections as a test for Afghan democracy, Joya is scathing. "The elections are under the warlords, drug lords, awful corruption and the occupation forces. To talk about free elections is not only ridiculous, it has no legitimacy at all.

"Most of the candidates are discredited faces. At most, one puppet can be replaced with another puppet. It's just for the US to deceive people around the world.

"There's a saying that it's not important who's voting, but who's counting. We have a proverb: same donkey, different saddle."

Despite her country's violent recent past, Joya remains optimistic about the ability of her

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people, in particular her generation, to bring change.

“We are the war generation. We saw nothing in our country but suffering, violence, rape ... and it's still going on. We have a responsibility, the children of Afghanistan, like the children of Palestine, Iran and other war-torn countries.

“I hope that in Afghanistan it will happen like it is in Iran — young men and women in great mass mobilisations.

“Hopefully this fascist government in Iran will be destroyed and the same will happen one day in Afghanistan.”