

Afghanistan's bravest woman calls on US to leave

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Global Research, November 19, 2009

[Women's eNews](#) 19 November 2009

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#), [Women's Rights](#)

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Malalai Joya, called the “bravest woman in Afghanistan,” is finishing up a U.S. tour where she has pressed the Obama administration to pull the military out of her country. She says nothing could be worse for women than what she sees as the current civil war.

(WOMENSENEWS)—Surrounded by powerful men twice her age, Malalai Joya, then 27 and the youngest person elected to the Afghan parliament, raised her hand to speak. She denounced the warlords and drug traffickers in the government and stood up in favor of women’s rights.

That was 2005, four years after the United States invaded Afghanistan.

Two years later, Joya was expelled from parliament for criticizing the warlords who she says remain in control of the country under U.S.-backed President Hamid Karzai.

Multiple times, her enemies have tried to kill her, forcing her to hide in safe houses and wear a burka.

Now, 31-year-old Joya, known widely as “the bravest woman in Afghanistan,” has come to the United States to promote her new book and deliver a message to the U.S. government as the Obama administration, according to widespread press reports, considers some level of troop buildup.

On tour from Oct. 23 to Nov. 12, she’s made the following demand in some two dozen engagements from New York to Los Angeles: “Leave my country as soon as possible.”

Joya is one of a handful of Afghan women speaking out against the occupation of Afghanistan and drawing attention to the worsening condition of women. Following the end of her U.S. tour, she will head to Canada for another round of speaking engagements.

Liberation for Afghan Women?

The United States billed the invasion of Afghanistan as a liberating moment for Afghan women.

“The last time we met in this chamber, the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school,” President George W. Bush said in his 2002 State of the Union address. “Today women are free and are part of Afghanistan’s new government.”

Joya said the violence of occupation and the misogyny of the country’s current political leaders have made life worse.

“Woman’s situation is like hell,” said Joya in a speech at Brown University, as part of her tour, noting that a single hospital in Kabul reported more than 600 attempted suicides, primarily by women from 2008 to 2009.

Joya called the current regime under the recently re-elected President Karzai “mentally similar to the Taliban,” saying the government “only physically has been changed.”

She pointed to Karzai’s signing of the so-called “rape law” as evidence of the misogynist nature of his government. Following global outcry in April, Karzai vowed to change the law, which mandated that Shia women submit to sex with their husbands. A second version of the law, which permits Shia men to deny food to their wives if they do not obey sexual demands, was passed this summer.

Afghanistan is “sandwiched between two powerful enemies . . . external enemies and internal enemies,” said Joya. “It is much easier to fight against one enemy than against two.”

The Afghan presidential runoff election scheduled for Nov. 7 was cancelled and Karzai, the incumbent, declared the winner after his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah, who had accused Karzai of fraud, withdrew from the race Nov. 1.

More U.S. Troops for Support

Although the legitimacy of Karzai’s presidency remains in question due to charges of vote tampering, President Obama appears poised to send more U.S. troops to Afghanistan to support him.

Many in the United States, including Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, believe that a civil war would erupt in Afghanistan if U.S. troops withdrew.

Joya is among those who say that the country has already reached levels of violence that amount to a civil war and that the Afghan people should be trusted to take control.

“Democracy by war is impossible,” she said in response to a question at Brown University about who would provide security in the absence of the U.S. military. “Let us breathe in peace,” she said. “We know what to do with our destiny.”

Joya gained international recognition in 2003 when she spoke out against warlords and drug traffickers at the Afghan constitutional assembly. Addressing the “felons” who controlled the country, she called them anti-woman, demanded they be put on trial in international court and declared that history would never forgive them. She was then pushed out of the assembly room in a sea of both threats and applause.

After speaking at Brown, Joya met with Women’s eNews and recounted with a smile another speech in which she compared members of parliament to animals, attacking their integrity and usefulness. That got her banned from parliament and stripped of her formal political role, but she has not stopped speaking.

Joya has little security at her speaking events, even though, as she told Women’s eNews, she faces threats from allies of Afghan warlords in this country.

Worth the Threats?

When asked if it is worth the threats and the separation from her family, Joya, who became emotional when talking about her siblings back home, responds with stories about women and girls who have been raped, tortured and murdered in Afghanistan.

She tells of a 5-year-old girl killed for resisting a grown man's attempts to rape her, another girl who begged for the right to divorce after her husband tortured her and hundreds of women who have burned themselves alive to escape nightmarish lives of poverty and abuse.

Sometimes she is unable to sleep at night after she has seen pictures of the horrors, she said. It is loyalty to "my people" that has brought her to the United States, where she has spoken to packed auditoriums and sold copies of her 2009 book, "A Woman Among Warlords."

Joya said she wrote the book in order to communicate a small part of the sorrow and pain of her people and to reveal the truth about the warlords who were her peers in parliament. Although government officials have demanded Joya's apology for insulting them, she does not believe she is the one who should be sorry.

"Someone had to do that and I did it . . . and I don't regret it," she said.

Instead, she addresses President Obama:

"Apologize to my people and end this."

Amy Littlefield is a freelance reporter who lives in Amherst, Mass.

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