

Critic of warlords murdered in Afghanistan

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The callous murder of Afghan journalist Zakia Zaki on June 6—shot seven times as she lay beside her infant son—epitomises the absence of anything resembling genuine democracy in the country after more than five years of US occupation.

Zaki owned and worked as a news presenter for Peace Radio, which broadcasts music, children's stories, women's rights information and pro-occupation news to Kabul and several neighbouring provinces. She was killed in the province of Parwan, not far from the huge US airbase at Bagram, by assassins who broke into her home late at night.

The provincial governor has blamed the killing on a member of Hezb-e-Islami, an organisation which, along with a resurgent Taliban, is fighting against the US occupation and the Afghan government.

However, Rahimullah Samander, the head of Afghanistan's Independent Journalists Association, suggested to Reporters Without Borders that Zaki may have been killed by a regional warlord of whom she had been critical. He did not name the person.

"She [Zaki] has been threatened because of some of her programs," he said. "And the people who issued the threats said that some reports were critical of one of the region's figures. They said the programs were a plot against that person. Regional commanders are influential in the province and they have created problems for her several times in the past."

Parwan province was once described by Afghan President Hamid Karzai as the "most secure" in the country due to the low level of Taliban activity. The security, however, stems primarily from the fact that it is one of the areas most firmly in the grip of the US military and various Afghan warlords who aligned with the US during the 2001-02 invasion.

Jamiat-e-Islami, which was the main faction within the US-backed Northern Alliance and now effectively controls Kabul and the surrounding region, has

substantial influence in the province. The organisation's main leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani, was Afghanistan's president from 1992-96. Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, who controls large swathes of northwestern Afghanistan, also maintains a presence in Parwan due to its proximity to the capital Kabul.

For all the US claims of democracy, the occupation has put effectively put Afghanistan in the hands of regional warlords and tribal heads with links to the US-backed Islamic *mujahadeen* who fought the Soviet occupation during the 1980s. They include a number of individuals, like Dostum and Rabbani, who are responsible for many crimes during the civil war that followed the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. The warlords' brutality, corruption and indifference to the plight of the Afghan people were major factors in the growth of support for the Taliban fundamentalist movement, which, with Pakistani and tacit US support, took power over most of the country by 1996.

The US invasion in October 2001 to overthrow the Taliban was viewed by many of the dethroned *mujahadeen* leaders as their ticket back into positions of power. As the Taliban's authority crumbled, the warlords and their militias claimed back their former territory and have exploited the US-led occupation to entrench themselves. Karzai's government is an ineffectual fig leaf that exerts little authority outside of Kabul.

Zaki, while a supporter of the US invasion, has come into repeated conflict with the local militias and politicians who have been elevated by the occupation. In 2002, she reported to the Journalists Association that she had been threatened by Jamiat militiamen for interviewing women in the street for her broadcasts.

In the September 2005 elections, she stood against the winning candidate Samia Sadat, a woman who is now the honorary director of the Parwan education department. In the course of the campaign, Sadat tried

to have Peace Radio closed down on the grounds it was a “propaganda tool” against her. After an attempt on her life in January 2006, Sadat falsely accused one of Zaki’s journalists of trying to kill her. Parwan police detained him for 11 months before the charges were finally dropped.

The election itself was labelled a farce by observers. Human Rights Watch noted: “Across the country, candidates and political organisers complained to Human Rights Watch of cases in which local commanders or strongmen, or local government officials linked with them, have held meetings in which they have told voters and community leaders for whom to vote. In some cases, candidates and their supporters allege that direct threats have been communicated.”

Following the election, Zaki publicly criticised the presence of dozens of warlords and militia leaders in the Afghan parliament whose attitudes toward democracy and the rights of women are essentially no different to those of the Taliban. As a result, she received “warnings” according to the Independent Journalists Association.

The treatment of Zakia Zaki is only one example of the systematic repression of any dissent to the regime that the Bush administration has erected in Afghanistan.

On June 8, unknown assailants stopped the vehicle of the country’s attorney-general, Abdul Jabar Sabet, and beat him with clubs and rifle butts just outside Kabul. Sabet had publicly condemned the corruption within Afghanistan’s government, particularly involving members of the Northern Alliance. His injuries were so severe that he is still in hospital.

Last month, the Afghanistan parliament voted to suspend female legislator Malalai Joya for telling a TV interviewer that the body was “worse than a stable”. At least, she said, cows give people milk, donkeys carry heavy loads and dogs are loyal. The parliament, by implication, provided the Afghan people with nothing. After showing the footage of the interview, the parliamentary speaker called for a vote to prevent her attending the parliament until the end of her five-year term in 2010. A majority supported the motion.

Speaking later, Joya declared: “Since I’ve started my struggle for human rights in Afghanistan, for women’s rights, these criminals, these drug smugglers have stood against me from first time I raised my voice.” During

the 2003 loya jirga to adopt a constitution and in parliament in 2006, Joya called the legislators “warlords”. Last year, bottles of water were thrown at her. She also claims to have been threatened with rape. Since her removal from parliament, she has warned that if anything happens to her “everybody will know” who is responsible.

Both Zakia Zaki and Malalai Joya were featured on western documentaries. Zaki appeared on the 2005 women’s rights feature *If I stand up*. Joya was the main focus of the 2005 documentary on the Afghan elections, *Enemies of Happiness*. They were presented as living proof that the US invasion in 2001 was bringing about fundamental change.

In reality, for all its talk of democracy including the rights of women, the Bush administration’s aim was to establish US dominance in Afghanistan which is strategically located next to the resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. Washington has no intention of undermining the network of warlords and tribal leaders on which its occupation rests by insisting they be removed from office and tried for their crimes.



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