An Afghan voice against the US-led occupation

James Cogan
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The so-called "lefts" and liberals who try to justify the war in Afghanistan with claims it is bringing democracy and liberation to women do not like what Malalai Joya has to say. A 31-year-old Afghan woman and politician, she is intimately familiar with the reality of what is happening in her country and she tells the truth: the US/NATO occupation has created a "disastrous situation" for the long-suffering Afghan people.

Joya gave an extensive interview to the WSWS earlier this month, while she was in Australia promoting her recently published biography, *Raising My Voice*. The book provides an account of her life, which has been shaped by the foreign occupations, insurgencies and civil wars that have ravaged Afghanistan since 1979.

As a child she lived as a refugee in both Iran and Pakistan during the protracted Soviet occupation. As a young woman, she defied the Taliban's reactionary restrictions on female education and helped operate an illegal school for girls in Herat province.

In the wake of the 2001 US-led invasion, she felt compelled to step forward and speak out against the pro-US puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai that had been installed in Kabul by the Bush administration. The occupation placed back into key political positions many of the brutal warlords and militia commanders who had plunged the country into civil war from 1992 to 1996. The Taliban's denunciations of their atrocities were a major factor in its ability to win support and take control of most of the country by the end of 1996.

At the age of 25, Joya was selected as a delegate to the December 2003 *loya jirga* that was convened to rubber-stamp a new Afghan constitution. Instead, she delivered a speech in which she demanded that the warlords should be put on trial for their numerous crimes, not sitting on constitutional committees and holding government posts. Her microphone was cut off within two minutes and she was temporarily expelled from the convention.

In September 2005, she was elected to the Afghan parliament as a representative of the western province of Farah. In May 2006, she was physically and verbally abused when she denounced other members of the assembly as the "kind [who] destroyed the country and killed 60,000 people". She was subsequently prevented from speaking on other occasions.

On May 21, 2007, the majority of the Afghan parliament removed Ms. Joya from her elected seat, using a clause in the constitution that forbids members from "publicly criticising" one another. Her offence had been to state in a television interview that the assembly was "worse than a stable" because at least animals served useful purposes.

More than two years later, she is still barred from the parliament. She lives under the shadow of death threats, issued by both pro-US Afghan factions and the Taliban, and she is forced to take extraordinary security measures to avoid assassination. Despite the dangers, she continues to speak out.

Her voice deserves to be heard. Her words are a damning indictment of all the apologists for the war in Afghanistan.

Note: Malalai Joya is not a native English speaker. For clarity, her answers have been grammatically edited.

James Cogan: What do you hope to achieve with the book *Raising My Voice*?

Malalai Joya: After the 9/11 tragedy, the US and its allies invaded my country in the name of women's rights, human rights and democracy. Through the media they try to promote this to people around the world. It is all propaganda and lies.

I hope this book will first of all open the eyes of democratic people around the world and also send the message on behalf of my people that in the struggle for emancipation we need the helping hand of democratic men and women, human rights' activists and women's rights activists. We want liberation. We don't want occupation.

Most importantly, the book is to take the mask from the fundamentalist warlords, drug-lords and criminals who after 9/11 came to power in the name of democracy, but who are mentally [ideologically] the same as the Taliban. Today in Afghanistan, we have a mafia system and it is an especially hard situation for women.

JC: Why do you think the US and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001?

MJ: Why did they bring the Northern Alliance [the anti-Taliban alliance of former Afghan warlords] to power? The US and its allies invaded Afghanistan and imposed such elements on our people for their own strategic policies and because of the geo-political location of Afghanistan. The military bases in Afghanistan can be used to control other Asian powers like China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan and other countries.

It is impossible to bring democracy, women's rights and human rights through the enemies of these values and also through war. You can't. The situation in Afghanistan and Iraq proves that.

After nearly eight years, they have turned Afghanistan into a centre for drugs. High-ranking officials in the government are famous drug-traffickers, such as Hamid Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai.

Now, they are negotiating with the Taliban. Since Obama has come into power, there have been invitations for Hekmatyar [1] to join the government, and even Mullah Omar [2]. Some former Taliban are already in power.

JC: Do you have any information on how advanced the talks with Hekmatyar and other factions are?

MJ: They want to negotiate with them. Many times Karzai made invitations during the Bush administration. Since Obama came to power, he also wants to call barbaric Talibs "moderate" and let them join the government.

That is why we believe that they have pushed us from the frying pan into the fire. Obama's policies are quite similar to Bush—and in some

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sense he is worse than him. The air strike in Farah province was the most brutal since 2001 in Afghanistan. More than 150 people were killed. It was quite a massacre and most of them were women and children. They even used white phosphorous.

They didn't want to give an exact report. They said only 20 to 30 civilians were killed. Later they said the Taliban killed them. These are just lies. Karzai's government had a commission which went there and they said 144 were killed. But it was more than that.

It is first of all shameful of the US government. It is a war crime they are committing in Afghanistan. After seven years we have gained nothing. We have only lost our independence. If the occupation forces do not leave Afghanistan voluntarily then they will face the resistance of my people.

During the first few months of Obama's administration around 400 civilians have been killed. He wants to surge more troops to Afghanistan. More troops will bring more conflict, more war. Under Obama, it is not only Afghan civilians being killed, but also innocent people in the Pakistan border area.

JC: The way it is presented in the US and Australia is that the only people who are opposed to the occupation are Taliban or Islamic extremists.

MJ: Firstly, let me say that the Australian government has followed for eight years the wrong policy of the US government, which is a mockery of democracy. As I have said, they imposed the sworn enemies of democracy on our people. While we have many democratic men and women in our country and also some democratic parties, they are very weak today.

Karzai's government is a puppet, mafia regime—one of the most corrupt governments in the world. Today, 18 million people live on less than $2 a day, while Karzai's government has received $18 billion from the international community in the name of reconstruction. Most of the money from the international community went into the pockets of the warlords or the official donors themselves.

The city of Kabul has been changed into the city of beggars. Most of them are women and children. Eighty percent of the people live below the poverty line while America alone spends $100 million a day on the war.

We are sandwiched between two enemies: external enemies and internal enemies. If the external enemy leaves Afghanistan and stops supporting the enemies of my people with money, power and weapons, it will be easier for us to fight against them. They have already been prosecuted in the minds and hearts of our people. Our people do not support them anymore.

Let me say on behalf of my people, condolences to the families in Australia, and the US, and England, who have lost their loved loves, their husbands and sons in Afghanistan. They are the ones who first of all should raise their voices against the wrong policies of their governments.

JC: Are you supporting any candidate in the August elections in Afghanistan?

MJ: Our people have no hope in an election under warlordism, drug-lordism, corruption and occupation forces. It has no legitimacy at all. Most of the candidates are discredited faces.

Karzai is a shameless man. He is betraying my people by choosing [for vice-president] two cruel and criminal men like Fahim [3] and Khalili [4]. Even Human Rights Watch said that by this act Karzai insulted the people of Afghanistan.

To help the democratic people around the world to better understand this election it is enough just to say "one puppet will be replaced with another puppet". My people know even now that the winner will most certainly be selected behind the closed doors of the White House and the Pentagon.

JC: Can you describe the living conditions that face ordinary people? For example, what are conditions like in Farah province where you are from?

MJ: Like most of the men and women of my country, Farah people suffer injustice, from insecurity, from poverty and joblessness. There are local warlords, on one side, who are in power on behalf of this government and control Farah province, but from another side, the Taliban criminals are also getting more powerful.

There is no justice in Afghanistan. The number of rape cases is historical. In the northern provinces, the Northern Alliance warlords are very powerful. Twelve rape cases have been reported by the media but there are many more than that. A woman was raped by three men, one of them a son of a member of parliament, and the police didn't pay any attention to the case.

When I get back to Kabul I have an appointment with another girl who was raped. I try to meet with them just to try to give them strength, to give them hope, so they don't burn themselves [commit suicide].

While education is a key to our emancipation, the fundamentalists are against education. They are killing the teachers, threatening the teachers. They are throwing acid in the faces of the girls. Fifteen girls who went to school in Kandahar province had acid thrown in their faces. More than 100 female students in the northern provinces of Afghanistan were poisoned.

The condition of the schools is very poor. Teachers go for months without receiving salaries. The salaries are not enough for living, about $60 a month. They have just blackboards and no heat.

They are establishing private schools and universities. The best teachers are going to them and the families and children of the warlords and those who are in power can go. Most people cannot go.

The level of education is very low. According to Oxfam, just one in five girls are in primary education and one in 20 in secondary school. Some 200,000 children in the areas under the control of the Taliban are completely deprived of education.

JC: Can you describe the situation you face for speaking out the way you have?

MJ: My life is no better than that of my people. I exposed these warlords after 2003 and my life has changed and become risky, and day by day it becomes more risky. I am woman and those in power are against women.

Five times they have tried assassination attempts against me. I have to change houses and face many other problems that you can read about in the book. My life is an example of the life of democratic and innocent men and women of my country who nobody knows about. Democratic activists are risking their lives.

Nobody listens to our voice. Because I spoke the truth inside parliament, they cut off my microphone and they threatened me. In May 2006, they threw bottles of water at me and threatened me with rape inside parliament. Every time I expose their crimes, they say I am an "infidel", "a communist", "not Muslim".

The ones in power mix Islam with politics, just like the Taliban. They use it like a whip against our people. No-one is allowed to talk about secularism. Because they could not make me silent in parliament, they used one of my interviews against me and expelled me, which was an illegal act and against freedom of speech.

They threatened my lawyers. In parliament, they even said I must be punished with the Kalashnikov [rifle]!

Anyway, as I told them: "One day you may be able to kill me physically. You are killing thousands of my people, millions of my people. But you can never kill the voice of the people. One day the truth will be known." I do not fear death. I fear political silence.

JC: Western governments try to justify the occupation with claims that if foreign troops left there would be a civil war...

MJ: They say that if they left Afghanistan a civil war will happen? Let's talk about today's civil war.

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After nearly eight years, we have not gained even the limited rights that Afghan women had in the 1970s and 1980s. After 9/11 they said that women can now take off the burkha. Laura Bush always tried to make this point for the Bush administration. But the burkha is not the main problem for women of my country, and not the only problem. Women wear the burkha today for security reasons.

That is why I am saying the only solution is a secular, democratic government in my country. The occupation forces are supporting the enemies of my people and it is better that they leave. We will know what to do about our destiny. It is easier to fight against one enemy than two.

We must end the drama of the "war on terror", which is a war against the innocent people of my country. The US government has long had plans for Afghanistan. Now it is making a massive base at Bagram and forcing local people to leave. They are spending $80 million to set up a new Guantánamo Bay camp there, and this is happening under Obama's administration.

We will never accept the occupation. One day, I'm sure they will face the resistance of my people. We have lost almost everything, but we have gained one positive thing and that is the political knowledge of my people has improved and that gives us hope for the future of Afghanistan.

Notes:

[1] **Gulbuddin Hekmatyar** was the main US-backed mujahaddin warlord in the 1980s. In 1992, he was installed as prime minister. In subsequent factional warfare, he ruthlessly attacked his opponents and the civilian population. Along with other warlords, he was driven out of Kabul by the Taliban in 1996. After the US invasion, he came into conflict with the occupying powers and called for an alliance with his former Taliban enemies and advocated armed resistance to the foreign forces.

Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami movement is currently waging an anti-occupation guerilla war in southern and eastern Afghanistan. In May, there were reports that it had been offered talks over the possibility of ending its involvement in the insurgency and joining the Afghan government. Hekmatyar was to be granted a full amnesty for his past crimes. To date, Hezb-e-Islami has rejected the overtures.

[2] **Mullah Omar** is the religious leader of the Taliban movement, which overthrew the warlord regime in 1996 and established a harsh Islamic state until its overthrow by the US invasion. He is believed to be directing Taliban resistance to the occupation from somewhere in Pakistan.

Hamid Karzai has publicly appealed to Mullah Omar on several occasions to agree to "peace talks", most recently on July 13. To date, the offer has been rejected by the Taliban.

[3] **Mohammad Qasim Fahim**, an ethnic Tajik warlord, was the commander of the Northern Alliance's forces in October 2001 and assisted the US military overthrow the Taliban. In the 1990s, the militia under his command was accused of massacres and atrocities against civilians, especially in Kabul.

[4] **Karim Khalili**, an ethnic Hazara powerbroker, is one of the current vice-presidents of Afghanistan. Like Fahim, he is accused of atrocities against civilians during the 1992 to 1996 civil war.

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