

“Good people cannot be silent”

By Synne Hall Arnøy

Malalai Joya was ousted from the Afghan parliament because she dared to raise her voice. Now she asks you to raise yours.

“I often say that silence of good people is worse than actions of bad people,” Joya said in her address at USF November 9, 2009. Although physically small, the Afghan woman combines giant courage with calm compassion to easily fill the hearts of the audience. “As justice loving, democratic persons we must all contribute to stop the war that the Afghan people have been suffering from for too long,” she boldly declared. “We must stop the criminals by speaking the truth.”

The truth Joya referred to is simple: freedom cannot be won through occupation. Peace and democracy cannot be won through war. “Some people ask me about good war versus bad war. My answer to them is: there is no good war. War is war,” Joya stated. “Afghanistan does not need liberators from foreign countries,” she continued, “we need the U.S. and NATO troops to leave so that we can be our own liberators.” Joya is quick to meet the argument she is faced with most often: if the troops are pulled out they will leave civilians as victims in an upcoming civil war. “Let me make one thing very clear,” she said resolutely: “There *was* already a civil war in Afghanistan when the occupation began. The mice in the war have become wolfs with American support. If they do not stop arming them now they will become dinosaurs.”

Governmental corruption

In 2005, Joya became the youngest elected member of the Afghan National Parliament. Only two years later she was suspended for giving a speech where she denounced the presence of criminal warlords and drug lords within the government. “I spoke up against the criminals in power,” she explained, “and you will not get away with that easily.”

Joya argued that the warlords in the government are mental photocopies of the Taliban. “There are killers and rapists in our government supported by the U.S. and NATO. They have high posts and create laws so that they can enjoy impunity,” Joya said, adding that “this is possible because the criminals join hands. Taliban and the warlords negotiate. What they say to foreign policy makers is a strategic play to keep power. And the Afghan reporters that dare to tell the true story are killed.”

For bravely raising her voice in truth, Malalai Joya is the winner of numerous human rights rewards. She is currently travelling the U.S., Australia, and Canada to promote her recently published memoir, *A Woman Among Warlords – The Extraordinary Story of an Afghan Who Dared to Raise Her Voice*. “I was convinced to write this book by my supporters. I am not writing it to draw focus towards myself, but to draw attention to the Afghan history and the suffering of the Afghan people,” Joya explained.

A history of war

Joya’s 30-year-old life does in itself portray the recent Afghan history: a history of war. The Soviet Union occupation began three days after she was born and there has been continuous war in Afghanistan since. “The warlords have changed names with every new injustice and occupation, but that is the only thing that changes,” she explained.

After surviving more than five assassination attempts, Joya is now followed by bodyguards and seldom sleeps in the same bed two consecutive nights. She does not represent or even mention any supporting organizations because this would put them in danger. Joya describes herself as a social activist for human and women’s rights, however aimed at political change. “Of course what I do is political,” she said. “Everything is. When my Afghan sisters tell me that they are not into politics I tell them that they deceive themselves with those words. Our generation *has* to do politics. But not the dirty kind of politics disguised in the name of democracy.”

Joya does not hesitate to mention the names of people in the parliament who she believes to violate justice. “You can count the democratic people in the parliament on one hand,” she said, “and the few who are there do not dare to speak. When I was in parliament, they asked me if I could say this and say that because they were afraid to say it themselves. I am thankful for their support but I need their voices. The Afghan people need their voices,” she continued. “However, more people speak up now. Please support them every chance you get.”

Joya is well aware of the dangerous position she is in. “I know of a child who in school mentioned a woman who was kicked out of the parliament for speaking up against the warlords. When the teacher asked her, ‘Do you mean Malalai Joya?’ the child responded, ‘Shhh, don’t mention her name.’ Her father had told her to keep my name in her heart but that it was dangerous to say it out loud.”

Obama’s war

Joya does not blame the war on the average American citizen. “I am honored to have a lot of the American people’s support. When I say the U.S. I am speaking about the U.S. *Government*,” she emphasized, adding that “everyone here can relate to our warlords because you had President Bush.”

She was hopeful when President Obama was elected but is not yet convinced by his actions. “I used to call this ‘criminal Bush’s war’, but I hate to say this: it is becoming Obama’s war. More civilians are killed in Afghanistan now. The money spent on this war is increasing. Obama is continuing Bush’s policy and he is supporting and arming the warlords. He must support justice-loving people. We have many of them. Instead he is making dirty people powerful,” Joya remarked.

A lot of money was recently spent on building a ring road told to stimulate the economic situation of the provinces of Afghanistan. Joya is sceptical: “I think they build roads to make the occupation easier. How are my people supposed to trust that this is done for good while women and children are being bombed? There is a lot of so-called humanitarian work, like building schools with no protection. They are raping and killing my sisters and paying for my criminal leaders. If they leave us alone and in peace we will build our own roads.”

Joya expressed her condolences to the American mothers who have lost their sons and daughters in Afghanistan. She hopes some of the sorrow can be transferred into strength so that more people can raise their voices against “the U.S. Government’s wrong policy.”

“Civilians are killed every day. Do we hear any apologies from the White House?” Joya asked rhetorically. “I believe the people of my country are worth as much as the people of your country.”

Human rights

Joya gives heartbreaking examples of the grave incidents of violence that take place every day in Afghanistan, especially crimes aimed at women. “We are discussing women’s rights but let’s focus on the basic: women in Afghanistan do not have *human* rights. They have their noses and ears cut off and are raped without the offender being persecuted,” she emotionally stated. “Killing a woman is as easy as killing a bird and all of this is happening in the name of democracy.”

The percentage of women in the Afghan parliament is relatively high: 68 out of the 249 seats. According to Joya, however, most of them are fundamentalists supporting the warlords. “Once a woman of the parliament threatened me with these words: ‘if you do not sit silent I will do you a kind of harm that no man would ever dare to.’”

Let them leave

Malalai Joya does not plan on taking residence outside of Afghanistan to provide her own safety. “Why should I leave my own country? Let *them* leave. Let *them* go away. There are women that set themselves on fire, committing suicide because of the constant violence towards them. I have to go back and ask them to live.”

When asked about her source of strength, Joya pointed to the support she experiences. “The support of my people, and your solidarity, gives me, gives us, hope. I am honored to be a voice of my people. There are many voices I cannot even compare myself with. The only difference is that they are not famous.”

Joining hands

Joya is supported by several human rights’ organizations and is collecting evidence that can make it possible to “bring the criminals to court”. “But,” she added, “this is not enough. I need your voices. Please join hands and speak up for justice and democracy.” She encouraged the audience to “educate people” and to “send the policy makers the message that this is not okay. Write letters. Tell President Obama to stop arming the warlords.”

Despite great pain in her eyes, Joya’s heart is filled with hope. “The truth brings hope and cannot be hidden. More and more people are conscious about the truth and are willing to share it”, she said. “The warlords can cut the flowers down but they can never stop our voices.”

Link: <http://www.malalajoya.com/>

Link: <http://winwomenspeak.wordpress.com/>

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