

Malalai Joya, Afghanistan's Youngest Revolutionary

By Sonali Kolhatkar

On December 17, 2003, a 26-year-old woman named Malalai Joya joined hundreds of others in a large tent in Kabul, Afghanistan, to adopt a new constitution for their war-torn nation. The traditional gathering, called a loya jirga (grand assembly), was dominated by U.S.-backed warlords responsible for mass slaughter and violence in the 1980s and early 1990s. Malalai Joya was present as an elected delegate from Farah province in western Afghanistan.

Like the rest of the independent delegates in the tent, she despised the warlords. When Joya was granted permission to address the assembly, she did what no one expected by publicly and unequivocally denouncing them:

“My criticism on all my compatriots is: Why are they allowing the legitimacy and legality of this loya jirga to come under question with the presence of those felons who brought our country to this state?... The chairman of every committee is already selected. Why do you not take all these criminals to one committee so that we see what they want for this nation? These [men] turned our country into the nucleus of national and international wars. They were the most anti-women people in the society . . . who brought our country to this state, and they intend to do the same again. I believe that it is a mistake to test those already being tested. They should be taken to national and international court. If they are forgiven by our people, the bare-footed Afghan people, our history will never forgive them. They are all recorded in the history of our country.”

Her microphone was cut off before she could finish, but the two-minute speech changed Malalai Joya's life. She became a heroine of the Afghan people and a target of the warlords' wrath. Since 2003, she has had her home and office ransacked by warlord supporters, and has survived four assassination attempts. The BBC has called her “the most famous woman in Afghanistan.”



An Interview with Malalai

In February 2005, Sonali Kolhatkar interviewed Malalai Joya at her office in Farah City, Afghanistan:

Kolhatkar: When you were at the loya jirga in 2003, did you plan on saying the words you said?

Joya: I wanted to ask our government and the countries that helped Afghanistan, especially the U.S., “Why did you replace the Taliban with the Northern Alliance?” They destroyed our country from 1992 to 1996.

When I went to the loya jirga, I saw the situation becoming worse each day. This was not a democratic situation. I finally went to the chief of the loya jirga, Mojaddedi, and told him that I wanted to make a speech on behalf of the young generation of Afghanistan.

Before the loya jirga, I made a speech in Farah. Some told me, “Your speech is very dangerous. The warlords are in power and they will kill you.” I said, “I will never be afraid. Because I spoke the truth and I'm sure that if they kill me, my people are with me.”

Kolhatkar: What kind of threats did you receive?

Joya: After the loya jirga my life completely changed. That night the National Army escorted me because they knew I was not safe. All of the criminals were very emotional. They attacked the place where I was staying, the special place for women at the loya jirga.

They said some things against me. For example, “Die Malalai, she is not telling the truth,” “We are against Malalai.” They called me a prostitute, an infidel, a communist, etc.

I promise that while I am alive and have energy, I have decided to work more and more for my people and struggle until we achieve rights for the women of Afghanistan.

Kolhatkar: How did people of Afghanistan show their support for you?

Joya: I am honored and proud. I received a lot of warm messages. I am a servant of my people. Now I accept this risk because of my people.

They [warlords] killed a lot of democratic people. Maybe one day they will kill me. But I will never be afraid.

Kolhatkar: What did you think about the clause in the constitution that makes Islamic Sharia law the supreme law of the land?

Joya: The warlords are using the name of Islam for their own benefit. They are not real jihadis. They are the enemies of our countries that used Islam for about 25 years of war. After the Russian puppet regime they committed all kinds of crimes under the name of Islam. Now our people know very well that they are not Muslim. But the people are afraid of them. They have to obey them.

Kolhatkar: After the loya jirga, the

then U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, wrote in the *Washington Post* that the fact that you were able to make that speech at the loya jirga was an example of democracy. How do you respond to that?

Joya: Why didn't he say what happened after the speech? Now, nobody knows! Now what kind of life does Malalai have? Every step of my life is a risk of death. Now I have to be in the house with bodyguards! I hate guns! The guns destroyed our country. But now I have to wear a burqa! I have to take care of my security

I want you to tell the American people, "Why don't you ask why they attacked this girl in the loya jirga? Does it mean democracy? Does it mean wom-

en's rights?"

Kolhatkar: George Bush and his administration have told Americans that Afghanistan has been liberated, that Afghan women are now free and that there is democracy and elections. How do you respond to these claims?

Joya: It's just a slogan. There is no fundamental change in Afghanistan. In the capital, it's true that women can have jobs and go to school. But in faraway provinces they have many health and educational problems. They have local warlords that have ideas against women and girls.

We have two kinds of problems. Our country is a male-dominated. But the other problem, which is even more important, is warlords. Some of these men

now wear a "suit of democracy." They have learned to speak about democracy. Some of them are now in the new cabinet of Afghanistan. Our people are afraid even of their shadow.

Also, our people requested of the government of Afghanistan, "Please change these policies—do not make compromises with the warlords." In the presidential elections, our people once again trusted Mr. Karzai because they wanted to show their hatred for warlords. He promised: "I will never compromise with warlords." I met with Mr. Karzai. He also promised me that he wouldn't work with the warlords but he appointed them to his cabinet.

Source: *Clamor*, June 10, 2006.

Hat Trick: Selling "Brand Karzai"

By Marc W. Herold

The centrality of image over substance as regards Karzai was revealed in the first weeks after the Taliban was bombed out of power in December 2001. Besides being a known and compliant asset of the West, Hamid Karzai could be marketed to the general public as a man of taste, chic and aristocratic heritage. Within a month after the Taliban had abandoned Kandahar, the western press was promoting Afghanistan's "Mr. Chic." Karzai was said by the poised BBC to have, "broken new sartorial ground by marrying classic tailoring with ethnic fashions.... Mr. Karzai has a knack for combining classic and ethnic. One of his trademarks is



The pre-makeover Karzai

to layer Nehru-collar shirts, waistcoat and jacket. He is also well known for sporting Astrakhan hats."¹

By January 2002, the press was

reporting that Karzai was pleased with his fame as a "fashion plate."² Georgie Anne Geyer added,

"The *Washington Post's* congenitally snippy Style Section went furthest in falling all over itself, when writer Robin Givhan wrote breathlessly of Karzai, 'there is a lot of Hollywood' in the man. 'Many are captivated by his signature hat and billowing cloaks in vivid shades of emerald green or exuberant ribbon stripes,' she went on. 'They like his flowing shirt with its banded collar... Karzai is an alpha male with a peacock's flamboyance. Might other men follow? Designers can only dream.'"³

By mid-2002, he was touring Western capitals establishing himself "as a well-educated, westernized and stylish [leader]...He won...praise from the Gucci fashion house for his trademark green-and-white traditional Uzbek coat and his ceremonial karakul hat."⁴

The western press had successfully leveraged Karzai's fashion style into statesmanship. But many Afghans well knew that "Karzai is not the president of Afghanistan, B-52 is president."

Endnotes:

1. See "Picture Gallery: Afghanistan's 'Mr. Chic,'" BBC News, January 17, 2002.
2. "Aghan's Karzai Aims to be More than a 'Fashion Plate,'" Reuters, Jan. 21, 2002.
3. "Karzai's Colorful Clothes Show More



Gucci's creative director Tom Ford calls Karzai the world's "most chic man."

than Good Fashion Sense," Uexpress.com, February 1, 2002.

4. "Hamid Karzai: Shrewd Statesman," BBC News, June 14, 2002.

Source: "Hat Trick: Selling Brand Karzai," March 10, 2006. www.cursor.org/stories/emtpyspace3.html