

Afghans “Sandwiched” between Taliban and US-NATO backed Warlords

Malalai Joya’s “Raising My Voice”

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Malalai Joya’s central message in Raising My Voice is that “today the Afghan people are tragically sandwiched between two enemies-the Taliban on one side and the US/NATO forces and their warlord friends on the other” (pp. 5, 246).

The book contains some autobiographical chapters, but is mostly an analysis of the problems faced by Afghanistan and possible solutions, including Joya’s thoughts on this week’s elections and whether or not there should be negotiations with “moderate” Taliban.

Malalai Joya is Afghanistan’s youngest member of Parliament, well-known for openly challenging the US/NATO, warlords, and the Taliban. She spent her childhood in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan and returned to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in the late 1990s, where she worked for underground organizations helping women.

She was elected to Parliament in 2005 but was suspended in 2007 after saying it was worse than a zoo or stable, because at least “in a stable we have animals like a cow which is useful in that it provides milk, and a donkey that can carry a load” (171).

Joya’s key argument is that the US/NATO, warlords and Taliban must be rejected and instead, progressives must be empowered, such as herself, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), and others.

This is an important point because the mainstream media and government officials would have us believe that the only options in Afghanistan are the US-backed government or the Taliban. So there is plenty of discussion in government circles and the news on whether or not to bring in some “moderate” Taliban in government, on the number of extra troops that should be sent to Afghanistan, and on the challenges faced in building the army and police to protect the state.

Those discussions all assume that the Afghan government is relatively democratic and a force for good, whereas in fact it is infested with warlords and fundamentalists. This is a direct result of US policy, which actively supported warlords and drug lords from 2001 onwards as they were deemed useful in routing the Taliban. As such they received millions of dollars from Washington, leading to their empowerment up to this day.

[The Wall Street Journal reported](#) that warlords currently cooperating with the US include Gul Agha Shirzai (governor of Nangarhar province), Ismail Khan (previously governor of Herat province, now Minister of Energy in Karzai’s cabinet) and Atta Mohammed Noor (governor of

Balkh province). Other analysts have also made the same point [here](#).

Joya says that some members of Parliament are not even literate and that one day she saw a fundamentalist commander sitting in front of her with his newspaper open as if he was reading but he was holding the paper upside down! [Human Rights Watch has estimated that “up to 60% of deputies in the lower house, are directly or indirectly connected to current and past human rights abuses.”](#)

But individuals like Joya are virtually ignored, or worse, threatened or killed by those who hold power in Afghanistan, and it's easy to understand why: if progressives are empowered, they will soon ask foreign troops to leave and move to put on trial the warlords and drug lords currently supported by the US, along with the Taliban.

The book proposes the following steps to improve the situation in Afghanistan.

Send real humanitarian aid: [The US alone spends \\$100 million on the military every day in Afghanistan, whereas total international aid for reconstruction comes to a meager \\$7 million a day](#), much of which never reaches those who need it, being lost in corruption mazes or returned to donor countries in corporate profits and consultant salaries.

In particular, Joya notes that “the position of women is the same now as it was under the Taliban” (226) and that many women in Parliament are allied with warlords, [as corroborated by a recent United Nations report](#).

Put an end to the rule of the warlords: Warlords and commanders must be disarmed. There have been some steps taken to this effect through the DRR and DIAG processes (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration; Disarmament of Illegal Armed Groups) [but the results have been limited and private militias are still powerful](#) [1]. Warlords and Taliban must be prosecuted for their crimes, as they are a “photocopy” of each other.

Withdraw all foreign troops: True, there is a risk that when foreign troops leave, civil war will break out again. This is why withdrawal must be combined to the disarmament of warlords and fundamentalist groups like the Taliban, and progressive groups must be supported to prevent criminals from taking power.

The book also offers Joya's thoughts on negotiations with the Taliban. She states that “It is incredible to me that these criminals and misogynistic killers could be considered part of a ‘settlement’” (242). Washington does not mind fundamentalists, as long as they are allies: what the US is looking for are Taliban who are ready to compromise with the government, who will then be called “moderate”.

What about the presidential candidates in this week's elections? Joya criticizes Hamid Karzai for having made so many compromises with warlords over the last few years and selecting two running mates, Khalili and Fahim, who are both infamous warlords. She denounces Abdullah Abdullah, seen by some as a serious challenger to Karzai who could force a run-off in the election, as being one of the most powerful men in the Northern Alliance, whereas Ashraf Ghani, a former Minister for Planning and also current candidate for the presidency, has “compromised” himself by working alongside warlords.

Writing as an activist, Joya's writing style is blunt and direct, but some readers may prefer more nuanced accounts. For instance, it would have been interesting to hear her views

about the possible presence of United Nations peacekeepers to replace the NATO/US troops and act as a buffer between the warlords and Taliban. This is an alternative that many members of RAWA, for example, could support (if done right), but the book doesn't address this important question.

Some might also charge that Joya only sees the US occupation in negative terms. But she points to one positive development of the war for Afghans: "Over the last thirty years, we have lost almost everything, and I think in many ways that the only positive thing we have gained is our people's political consciousness" (253).

Let's hope this consciousness translates into real change for Afghanistan.

Note

[1] Antonio Giustozzi, Bureaucratic Façade and Political Realities of Disarmament and Demobilisation in Afghanistan, *Conflict, Security and Development*, 8(2) (June 2008): 169-192.

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