

Malalai Joya:

Warrior Woman for Human Rights

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The BBC have dubbed the iconic MP Malalai Joya "the most famous person in Afghanistan." At the age of 29, she is the youngest member of Afghan National Assembly (or Wolesi Jirga) and a passionate defender of women and the impoverished in Afghanistan.

She is under the constant threat of assassination, and must travel around her home country under a burqa, protected by a group of armed bodyguards. The money for her bodyguards comes from donations of those sympathetic to her cause.

In March, she appeared on an Afghan TV show, and made an allusion comparing members of the assembly and stable animals. For her critics in the assembly, it was the last straw. They invoked Article 70 of the assembly, which forbids MPs from criticizing each other, and suspended her from parliament. Joya says that she

was told that Article 70 was created specifically for her.

Still, this has not stopped her from working for her people. She has now taken to traveling around the world to raise awareness of the terrible situation in her country.

In speaking to her, one is given the impression that she truly embraces her role as a "voice" for her people. At the same time, she does not think she is brave, and has no time for hero-worship. Her responsibility, as she sees it, is "to tell the truth."

She, like many members of "the war generation" - as Joya calls them - have grown up in the refugee camps of Pakistan during the 1978-1989 Soviet War, and have had to learn without any formal education. At the age of nineteen, Joya was teaching literacy to children in the camps.

Growing up, politics has always been a part of life:

"Families are always having discussions in their houses about what's happening, how the government is

doing, and what the news is saying. I think even the children of our country do politics."

During the run-up to the 2005 Afghan elections, the first in over thirty years, Joya was followed by a film-crew who composed the documentary, *Enemies of Happiness*. *Enemies of Happiness* provided the Western world a

window into the lives of the people in rural Afghanistan, the people Joya believes are suffering the most from Western occupation.

Enemies of Happiness went on to win World Cinema Jury prize for best documentary at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival.

In March, two months before her suspension from parliament, she was invited by the United Nations Development Fund for Women to speak at a forum in Sydney, Australia, celebrating International Women's Day.

On her current trip, she has spoken at Uvic, UBC, and Langara College, and has had interviews with the Vancouver Sun. This month she will also appear on *The Hour* with George Stroumbouloupoulos. In parliament, she has received support from the New Democrat Party, who invited her to speak at their party convention in October 2006.

Today, she says she feels "honored" that these people are supporting her

cause. She hopes that "freedom loving people" will "link arms" with those in other countries experiencing turmoil like Iraq and Burma to make a future better for the next generation.

Before leaving, Joya told me that she was looking forward to going home. Unfortunately, she will not be able to live with her family because of the numerous death threats against her.

That she might not see the Afghanistan she dreams is a possibility that she seems to have accepted. This, and her quiet courage, which has been an inspiration for many across the globe, is best exemplified by what she wrote for *Worldpulse* magazine:

"Never again will I whisper in the shadows of intimidation. I am but a symbol of my people's struggle and a servant to their cause. And if I were to be killed for what I believe in, then let my blood be the beacon for emancipation and my words a revolutionary paradigm for generations to come."



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