

Joya Speech Breaks Wall of Silence

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By Bashir Gawkh and Danish Karokhel in Kabul (ARR No. 90, 22-Dec-03)

The speech of Malalai Joya, a 25-year-old delegate from Farah province, on the fourth day of the Loya Jirga was widely publicised, and now the public is clamouring to see photos of her.

Joya's words caused a storm of controversy - not because her opinion was unusual, but because public criticism of jihadi leaders is rare and has always brought a severe backlash, including death threats.

But her speech, less than two minutes long, has broken through the wall of silence, and ordinary people now feel they can voice their criticism, too.

Safia Shahab, a Kabuli in her mid-20s, said Joya is the leader of Afghan women. "Malalai's speech was absolutely correct," she said. "These mujahedin blew Kabul city to pieces in the civil war."

Mohammed Nasir, a 25-year-old resident of Khak-e-Jabar village near Kabul, is among Joya's big fans after he heard about her speech on the radio. "If I get her picture, I will keep it with me, because she has pulled back the curtain to expose the facts," he said.

Demonstrations have been held in support of Joya in several provinces, the BBC has reported.

Some think so highly of Joya that they want to give her the title of "the second Malalai". Malalai is a famous 19th century Afghan woman who is credited with turning the tide in the battle of Maiwand, against the British. When the morning of the battle began with numerous casualties and Afghans began surrendering or running away, Malalai took up a sword to fight the British herself, singing an Afghan song, and inspired her countrymen to keep fighting.

Joya's foes, however, believe that her words were an offence to Islam and jihad.

Abdul Halim Haqparast, 60, said that Joya be tried for saying such "rubbish, and insulting to Islam and mujahedin. She should be put on trial. And the court should be made off Ulemas [religious scholars].

"Any decision the Ulemas make should be implemented, so that other women don't dare to do the same."

A student of Islamic law faculty at Kabul University, Sayed Afzel Sayidi, thinks that Malalai got it backwards, "The communists are the criminals who brought all this misfortune to our country - not the mujahedin. The mujahedin's protection of our country's daughters was a blessing, and they protected women from the evil of communists."

While not directly using the words jihadis or mujahedin, Joya referred to some of the Loya Jirga delegates and leadership as criminals who "destroyed the country".

"They made our country the centre of national and international fighting," she said in her speech. "They were the people who put our country in its current condition, and want to again...."

"They should be tried in national and international courts. Even if our people forgive them, history will not."

Her remarks caused some jihadi leaders to charge the stage, crying "Death to Communism!" and "Allahu Akbar [God is great]!"

Loya Jirga chairman Sibghatullah Mujaddidi at first tried to remove Joya from the assembly, but backed down when other delegates objected. Joya was then asked to apologise, but she stood her ground and would not retract her accusations.

Joya, who is staying with other delegates in the dorms of the Polytechnic near the Loya Jirga tent, has been given additional protection by the Afghan National Army and ISAF peacekeepers. The night of her speech, a group of men awakened the female delegates by shouting threats and calling her names. But security officials said they were not aware of any direct threats to Joya's life.

She has been criticised by conservative leaders, including Herat governor Ismail Khan, and jihadi groups. Mujahed, the weekly newspaper of Jamiat-e-Islami party, published reports that the national intelligence is trying to link Joya to a radical women's organisation and claim that she and her father were connected to communist groups.

A member of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Ittehad-e-Islami party, Ali Qaiser Amanzai, 37, thinks that Joya's speech was really the work of other people. "Someone else provoked Malalai Joya to bring chaos into the jirga, and make the jirga fail," he said.

Zabul province delegate Saifullah Haqbayan thinks that the speech of Joya was rude and not in keeping with Islamic society. "Freedom of speech doesn't mean that you say anything that comes into your head," he said.

However, others criticised Mujaddidi for his handling of the incident.

Sayed Afzel, a 42-year-old Logar native and shopkeeper in Kabul, said that Joya's speech was correct and that Mujaddidi did not have the right to try and evict her, "Mujaddidi is an appointed delegate. He should not throw out an elected member who was chosen by the public."

Kabul paramedic student Arif Ahmadzai, 21, is also supportive of Joya and angry with Mujaddidi for telling her to apologise, "Malalai didn't commit any sin that she should apologize for. That was her right to give her opinion."

Shila, a trainer for gender programmes, agreed, saying, "No one has the right to expel the delegates from the meeting. Before the work of the constitution was done by men, and enforcement was also done by men - and still this is the way it goes on."

Those who fought the Soviet Union called it a jihad because they were defending Afghanistan from the atheism of communism and protecting their families from the ruthless violence of the invasion. However, after driving out the communist regime, the jihadi leadership fell into factional fighting for control of Kabul, killing 60,000 people during the four-year civil war and leaving great swathes of the city in ruins.

Some former mujahedin, who went on to fight the Taleban regime, are now in power in the interim administration. Afghans grumble that these men are corrupt and abuse their power.

As in other debates about individual rights, mullahs are divided in their opinions.

An imam in Karte Naw district of Kabul, Maulawi Ghulamullah Naqshbandi, says that according to Islam women do not have the right to sit shoulder-to-shoulder with men and "say bitter words".

But another imam from a mosque in Chilsetun, Sultan Mohammad Khairkhwa, disagrees, "There is absolute respect for the freedom of speech in Islam. Everyone can offer his or her opinion with a fearless heart."

Bashir Gawkh, an independent journalist from Jalalabad, is participating in IWPR's Loya Jirga reporting project. Danish Karokhel is an IWPR editor/reporter in Kabul.

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