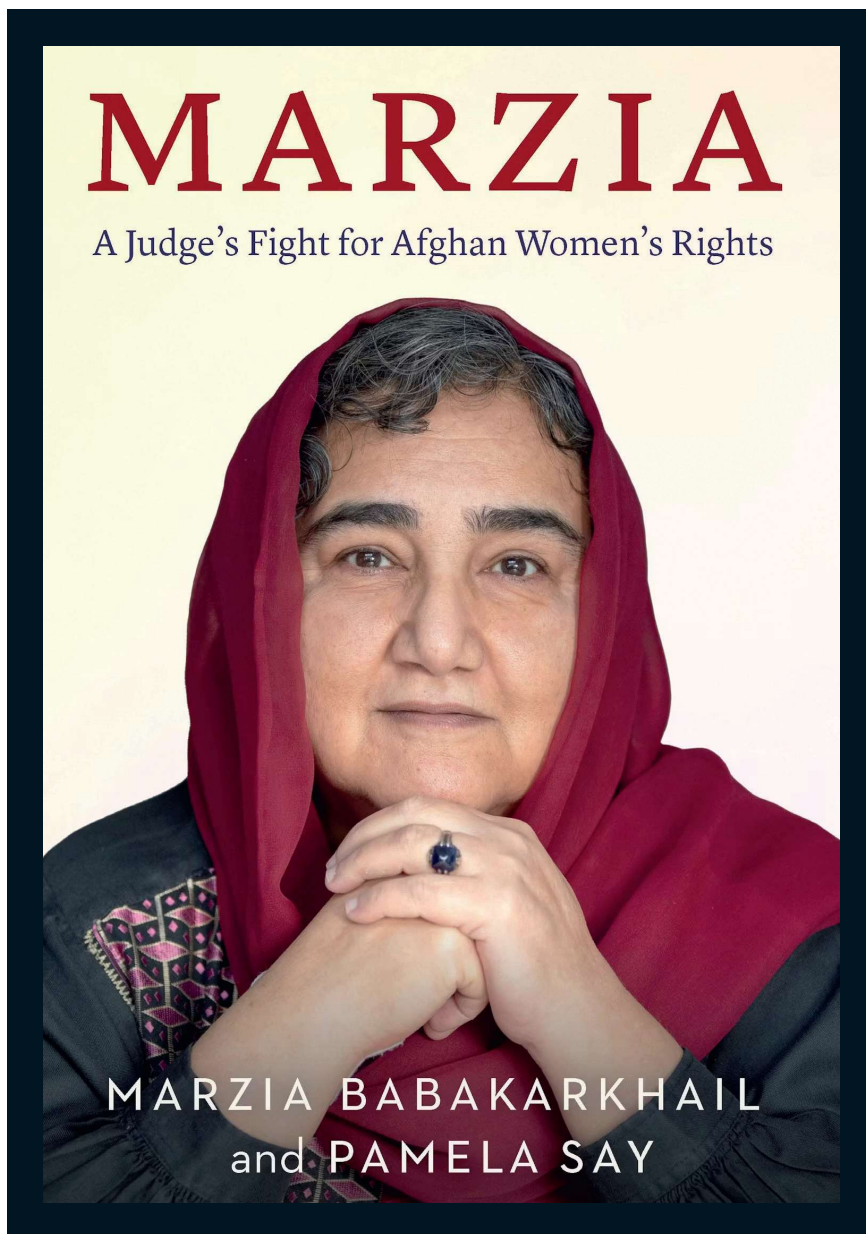


Don't forget the women of Afghanistan

MARZIA BABAKARKHAIL tells **RUTH GREEN** about her new book and the need for Afghan women to be heard



WHEN MARZIA BABAKARKHAIL left Afghanistan in November 2008, she arrived in the UK with just a single suitcase and not a word of English.

Over the course of her career, the family court judge had earned a reputation for helping women and girls, but this outreach work increasingly drew the ire of the Taliban. After two assassination attempts, she had no choice but to flee.

From a privileged background growing up in Puli Khumri, northern Afghanistan, she was forced at the age of 42 to rebuild her entire life alone in northern England.

She had to learn English, teach herself how to cook and live independently.

Her efforts paid off. She became a British citizen in 2016 and now works as a caseworker for an MP near Manchester.

Babakarkhail has continued to speak up for female colleagues and friends in Afghanistan.

As well as campaigning, she has always believed in the inherent power of books to expose stories too often hidden from view.

"When I was in college, my teacher gave me a book about the life of disabled women," she said. "The book made me cry but it also gave me energy to fight for tomorrow."

This unwavering determination to advocate for the voiceless influenced her early career in Afghanistan, leading her to set up a shelter for divorced women and later a school for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Decades on, in August 2021, she watched speechless from the UK as the Taliban's abrupt return to power put thousands of female judges like her in danger, simply for doing their jobs. With a terrible sense of déjà vu, her campaigning took on renewed urgency as she was thrust into a global logistical operation to evacuate hundreds of judges who feared Taliban reprisals.

Thanks to Babakarkhail and countless other campaign groups, almost five years since the Taliban takeover →



CREDIT: Connor O'Brien

→ many of these women are now also safe from harm – studying, working, raising families and building new lives in different parts of the world.

However, the situation in Afghanistan continues to worsen in the wake of sweeping cuts to international aid, mass displacement, ongoing drought and the Taliban's continued erosion of human rights.

Babakarkhail said she always wanted to write something that resonated with people like the book her college tutor gave her all those years ago. It took a chance encounter with writer Pamela Say, who interviewed her about her campaign work, to finally convince her that her dream could become a reality.

"A lot of people came together, especially Pamela Say and the University of Nebraska, and they encouraged and motivated me to finally write my story," she said.

The result – *Marzia: A Judge's Fight for Afghan Women's Rights* – charts her upbringing and personal challenges, including the deaths of both her parents, the two attempts on her life, her escape to the UK and being a refugee. It also recounts the tireless work by those who have helped female judges and others in the legal profession still practising in Afghanistan.

The book also leans heavily on the stories of high-profile female role models such as former Afghan MP Fawzia Koofi and Rina Amiri – the Afghan-born former US special envoy for Afghan women, girls and human rights – who she has met as part of her campaign work. She has also included accounts of the many women she met throughout her career as a judge.

She hopes her efforts to highlight their stories will ensure they are not forgotten – even as the world's gaze is increasingly diverted to conflicts in Ukraine, Iran and elsewhere.

"I wanted to remind people that

This Taliban government from the beginning always did something against women – whether it's closing schools [or] women losing their jobs. Everything is against women

their stories should not be removed from people's minds, nor the minds of government, society or the international community," she said. "There should be space for women in Afghanistan to speak up. I must raise their voice as a messenger."

The Taliban's increasingly repressive laws have severely marginalised women and girls, banning millions from universities, schools, workplaces and even public spaces.

In January, the authorities quietly unveiled a new sweeping criminal code which effectively authorises husbands and fathers to beat their wives and daughters and legalises slavery. Babakarkhail says this is just the latest extension of the Taliban's controls on women.

"This Taliban government from the beginning always did something against women – whether it's closing schools [or] women losing their jobs. Everything is against women."

For those who already felt trapped or imprisoned by the Taliban's draconian rules, Babakarkhail said the impact of this new law and the fear it has instilled is already palpable.

"I know a widow who is affected by

this new law," she said. "She has five daughters. When [the law was passed] she told me 'If this becomes very serious, I don't want the Taliban to come and take my daughters and put them in jail. I would rather give them some medicine to kill them in my house'."

When asked if she would consider herself a role model, Babakarkhail chuckled. Despite everything she has sacrificed, she knows she is one of the lucky ones. "I have a British passport, I have a job, I have everything."

As Afghanistan fades further from the international community's collective memory, she's hopeful that telling stories about strong women who are still defying the Taliban will encourage others to remember the very real dangers women still experience on a daily basis.

"These women stand against the Taliban. They are role models for all women in Afghanistan."

The single suitcase that Babakarkhail arrived with in 2008 now sits in Manchester's People's History Museum and formed part of a 2020 exhibition on migration. It remains part of the permanent collection – a living reminder of the dangers and sacrifices that many women, judges and refugees face worldwide.

Having recently celebrated her 60th birthday and the publication of her new book, Babakarkhail counts her blessings. However, she longs for her country and her sisters in Afghanistan to be free.

"Somebody called me recently and asked: 'Have you had your big day?' I said: 'No. My big day will be when the Taliban is over and I can go to see women in Afghanistan. That will be my big day'." ✕

Ruth Green is a journalist who writes about law, business and human rights. Marzia: A Judge's Fight for Afghan Women's Rights by Marzia Babakarkhail and Pamela Say is published by University of Nebraska Press (2026)

LEFT: Marzia Babakarkhail outside her home in the UK

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