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Palestine

Palestinians and the ever-widening intifada across the Middle East and North Africa

- IV Online magazine - 2011 - IV433 - February 2011 -
Publication date: Friday 25 February 2011

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The mass upsurges that drove out Ben Ali from Tunisia and Mubarak from Egypt have electrified people everywhere, but nowhere more than in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where people are still glued to al-Jazeera television, suspiciously evaluating the military “undertaker” regime in Cairo and alternatively excited and agonized by mass protests and brutal repression in Jordan, Bahrain, Iraq, Yemen, Oman, Algeria, Libya, Djibouti, Kuwait, Morocco and Iran. Keith Darwin, an Australian FI supporter, sent us this report.

https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/5_Feb_2011_Ramallah.jpg

Ramallah February 5th, 2011

Photo: KD

For Palestinians who are every day humiliated both by Israel and by their own “regime”, the reassertion of dignity by the Tunisian, Egyptian and Middle Eastern masses has been a great inspiration.

On the evening of Friday 11 February “” coincidentally the anniversary of the overthrow of the hated Shah of Iran in 1979 “” as people saw the fall of Mubarak, spontaneous (or mobile phone message-announced) marches began in Salaheddin Street in East Jerusalem, and in Palestinian cities within 1948 Israel.

In the Gaza Strip where 1.6 million people are suffering not only from the tightened Israeli siege, but also from Egypt’s complete closure of the Rafah border, celebration marches took place that evening in Gaza and Khan Younis cities, and in the larger refugee camps. The people wanted to congratulate the people of Egypt, so close-by across the border, and some fired guns into the sky as if marking a wedding. The Hamas administration was quick to welcome the downfall of Mubarak, not only because they are historically associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but also they voiced optimism that the border would quickly open, and Egypt would massively aid post-Operation Cast Lead reconstruction. Hamas rarely allows rallies other than its own; previous Egypt solidarity protests had been stopped. Political repression is directed mainly at Fateh, while the flags of the Democratic Front and Popular Front fly in the streets alongside Hamas flags. Hamas’ television is more professional and democratic than that of the PA in Ramallah, but people also respect al Manar from Lebanon, and above all al-Jazeera from Qatar, whose ruling family is the main funder of the Hamas government. When the Egyptian satellite cut Jazeera, viewers were desperate until it was re-routed.

Whether Hamas can still command a strong vote is unknowable. Although their administration is regarded as clean, and their performance in service-delivery, such as in health and schools is markedly better than the PA, the life-line of the tunnel imports is wearing thin, and their strategic limitations are showing: the 40% of Gaza Strip land left by the Israeli settlers is underutilized, even though the population is short of fresh food, and fishing is forbidden by the Israelis. The only construction thus far on the former Israeli settlements has been a prison.

In Nablus, the biggest city of the West Bank, people could only celebrate in mosque, church and home. But in Ramallah, the Palestinian NGOs, after many refusals, had been able to call a demonstration in solidarity with the Egyptian people of 1,000 participants in the Manara centre on 5 February. Protests have been forbidden by the Palestinian National Authority (PA) in recent years, and this rally was only approved at the last minute. Some Fateh and PA leaders had even unsuccessfully tried to call a pro-Mubarak rally in previous days. Trade union activists and people from the progressive political parties took part in this first rally but there were no party or union flags or banners at the demonstration. Participants carried small Egyptian flags, and one USA flag was burned on the lions of the Manara monument. There were no religious chants, and slogans from one group initially focussed on bringing back Nasser, and then the chants were about solidarity with those in Tahrir square and in Alexandria, such as “the

people will not be humiliated”, Mubarak is CIA”, “the people want to get rid of the regime”, “first to go Mubarak, second is King Abdullah (of Jordan), third is...” (Abbas of the PA?), then later some dared to change the chants: “the PA is CIA” and “the people want to get rid of Oslo”. Later, seven of the young men who led chants against Mubarak, America, the PA and Oslo at the march on 5 February were arrested and beaten up by the PA’s USA-trained security forces.

On the evening of Friday 11 February, on hearing the victory, people spontaneously came back into the streets of Ramallah. There were more unionists, inspired by the decisive entry of workers into action in Egypt. One chant was that “Ben Ali has called Mubarak to join him and the other thieves in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia). Another was that “after Egypt, the dictators in nearby places will fall”. People joked about Israel’s oft-repeated claim to be the only democracy in the region, since now so many Israeli and Western leaders are back-tracking rhetoric about democracy in Arab countries.

A further demonstration was able to be called by Palestinian NGOs on 17 February, this with several thousands in Ramallah. Ostensibly this was about calling on Fateh and Hamas to stop conflict and re-forge national unity, but its underlying dynamic was anti-PA. Meanwhile, the authorities in Gaza said that if people attempted such a rally, they would “break their bones”.

Palestinians are most conscious of the situation in Jordan, where police allowed a large and unprecedented demonstration in Amman on 29 January in support of Egypt and calling for democracy in Jordan, though not explicitly calling for the ouster of King Abdullah. Scared of events in Egypt, he had gone on hasty tour of Bedouin clan leaders in the south, cut fuel and food prices, raised public service salaries, and dismissed yet another government. A much larger demonstration on 18 February shows the dynamic of struggle is far from over.

With Lebanon still in political crisis, and the overall positive relationship of forces for the Hizbullah bloc, the possibility of a democratic Egypt, and the nightmare potential of a Palestinian-majority democracy in Jordan, the Israeli leaders are quietly panicking. It is rumoured they are planning Bahrain-style or Libyan-style massacres of Palestinian youth if a third intifada, as is likely, breaks out.

The life expectancy of Israel’s collaborator Palestinian Administration seems seriously threatened. The PA administers disconnected Palestinian cities and towns on 40% of the West Bank, and exercises limited security control over the cities on 17% of West Bank. The majority of the West Bank land, 80% of the water resources, the economy, and all borders and checkpoints remains under Israeli control.

Fateh and the PLO have atrophied and melded into the PA , representing 20 business families, a small comprador class based in Ramallah, and the interests of Israel and the USA. The CIA-trained security services cannot protect Palestinians, but manage resistance for Israel, in increasingly repressive ways, receiving 32% of the budget from donors.

The electoral mandate of President Abbas and PM Salam Fayyad, to the extent they had any, having been beaten by Hamas, and the Palestinian Legislative Council having never really met, with Israel having arrested a third of the 132 elected representatives, expired in January 2009. Shocked by the downfall of his friend Mubarak, and taking a cue from king Abdullah, Abbas sacked the PA Council of Ministers, retaining the neo-liberal technocrat Fayyad, whose party received on 2.5% of the votes in the 2006 elections. But dismissing the government doesn’t build any credibility among Palestinians in the West Bank, it only exacerbates competition between the Fateh gerontocracy. Abbas has no obvious successor. Security chiefs Mohammed Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub are too discredited. Marwan Barghouti from Fateh and Popular Front (PFLP) leader Ahmed Sa’adat are in Israeli gaols. There is some speculation about Nasser al-Qidwa, but Abbas is hostile to him.

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The negotiations leaks publicized by al-Jazeera have removed any doubts Palestinians had in the treachery of the PA, who faced with complete intransigence by the Israeli negotiators and squeezed every day by expanding illegal settlements, begged for some “fig-leaf” or token to distract attention from their surrender of Jerusalem, the refugees, the prisoners, and an independent state on enclaves of land in the West Bank. PLO Negotiator Sa’eb Erekat from Jericho had to resign.

The PA, through its collaboration, through co-option, and through outright repression, has ensured a depoliticized public life in the West Bank. People are just trying to survive and relying on their families. The great leaders have gone: Arafat as a national symbol seems better in hindsight the longer he is dead; Gaza’s respected Dr Haidar Abdel-Shafi, who led the Madrid talks in 1991, but walked out in 1997 when undermined by Arafat, and angered by corruption, died in 2007. George Habash died in 2008 after leaving leadership of PFLP, the second-largest party in the PLO, in 2000; his successor Abu Ali Mustafa was assassinated in 2001 by the Israelis, and in turn his successor, Sa’adat was imprisoned by the PA and then Israel.

The left parties remain marginal, unable to offer an alternative to the PA and lacking any traction with the rural or urban poor or people in the crowded refugee camps. They are compromised by their involvement in the PA and the Oslo process, which has only brought more settlements. In the 2006 elections the Popular Front gained 4% of the vote, the Democratic Front gained one seat, running in an Alternative front, with the Palestine People’s Party (formerly the Palestinian Communist Party). The Mubadara, or national initiative, formed in 2002 by left leaders Mustafa Barghouthi and Haidar Abdel-Shafi, gained only 2.7%.

The left parties retain their mass service organisations for agriculture, health, youth and women, in both Gaza and the West Bank. The Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), formed in 1994 out of the merger of the previously external Fateh workers’ front and Fateh, PFLP, Democratic Front and Communist unions, with thirteen affiliate unions in the Palestinian private sector, is surviving with extensive funding from Norway and other European unions, through the International Trade Union Confederation, which makes support conditional on pretending there can still be some peace rhetoric with Israel’s Histadrut which never criticizes its government for the occupation or for bombing or besieging Gaza. Like the PA, PGFTU leader Shaher Sa’ed calls for a boycott of settlement products, but hesitates, in deference to his funders, in calling for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) on Israel. With few workers crossing the Wall into settlements and Israel for day work, very high unemployment rates, and most Palestinians working in family businesses, farming, NGO or informal sectors, PGFTU faces serious constraints. The new Federation of Independent Unions, and the unions of the public sector workers, provide an alternative, one which is generally more able to campaign against the PA and clearly all for BDS against Israel.

The vast scale of the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements, in and around Jerusalem, in the Jordan Valley, and in on the hilltops of the West Bank, and the USA veto in the UN Security Council on a resolution opposing settlements on 18 February, at a time when USA-allied regimes across the region are under popular attack, poses a crisis for the only remaining negotiation strategy of the PA. On news of the veto, a hundred or so youth seized the opportunity of newly re-won freedom to protest in Ramallah, but the demonstrators were soon swamped with Fateh loyalists carrying pictures of President Abbas, and PM Fayyad issued a tweet saying it was not the right time for the UN motion.

As in past years, Abbas has called for municipal and then Legislative Council elections in September, but the conditions for free and fair elections, such as in 2006, no longer exist for the 4 million people in the PA or Hamas administered enclaves, nor in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem. Hamas says there can be no new elections without national political unity, and points to the need to reforge an inclusive PLO as a legitimate national leadership, presumably with elections that enfranchise Palestinians inside Israel, in the Occupied Territories, and in the refugee camps in neighbouring countries for a new Palestinian National Council, which hasn’t met in anyone’s memory.

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In as much as the Oslo process and “two-state” solution has reached its natural dead end with a Bantustan led by a discredited Quisling clique in Ramallah, and there is a paradigm-shift towards a global boycott campaign against Israeli Apartheid, and for an egalitarian bi-national state, many see an ideological leadership shift towards Palestinians within the 1948 borders, especially the left secular nationalist Tajamu/Balad, and its now-exiled leader Azmi Bishara. This shift is underlined by the changing demographics, with 5.8 million Jewish Israelis no longer constituting a majority of people under Israel’s control between the Jordan River and the Sea.

In the context of solidarity actions with the pan-Arab or pan-Middle East democratic intifada, international grassroots and trade union efforts for boycott, disinvestment and sanctions against Israel as called for by Palestinian civil society, need to be reinforced. With people-power putting the fear of death into the tyrants from Rabat to Teheran, and the decades-long pax Americana in tatters as long-invested allies fall, Palestine remains the fault-line between the Arab masses and colonialism.

Gaza

February 19th , 2011