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Palastine

Reform and restructuring in Palestinian society

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While Israeli tanks and planes were attacking the Palestinian cities, villages and refugee camps, and while Sharon was threatening to use even more force to break the will of the Palestinians and crush the resistance, the US administration began demanding that the Palestinian people and its Authority should reform its political, economic and security systems.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/12idfhole.jpg>] A young Palestinian demonstrates the Israeli Defence Force's less hazardous route for conducting house-to-house searches in Gaza

Since then, hardly a day passes without someone from the US administration or Israel mentioning reform and restructuring of the Palestinian Authority. A remarkable turn of events given that US has never shown any particular interest in internal Palestinian policies. What, one must ask, are the real reasons behind these new demands, and why were they made now? How do the Palestinians view this new turn of events?

No coincidence

The timing of the calls for reform was by no means a coincidence. For more than two years, Israel has been waging a comprehensive war against the Palestinian people, aborting negotiations that were to have led to Israel's withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. The US repeatedly intervened on Israel's behalf, granting Israel the right to 'defend itself' and, after September 11, condoning nearly every action Israel took against the Palestinian population as necessary in the fight against 'international terrorism.'

The United States would have liked to see a quick and decisive suppression of the Intifada so that the conditions could be imposed on the Palestinians for a final surrender. Neither the US nor Israel wanted to risk a replication of the Lebanese resistance movement's success, which led to the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000. As usual, the US blocked every attempt by the UN Security Council to censure Israel for its actions.

The ostensible aim of the attacks against the Palestinians was to put down resistance to the occupation and, despite the magnitude of the continuous Israeli operations and the backing provided by the US in the international arena, this goal has yet to be reached, leading to the question of whether winning this war is actually feasible. Consequently, the call for Palestinian reform became necessary as the Israeli war machine proved unable to stop the Intifada and Sharon's promises for security were dashed on the rock of Palestinian resistance. Facing the legendary steadfastness of the Palestinian people, Israel was once again obliged to call on the US for political backing, and it came in the form of a call for reform.

Factors of influence

When it became apparent that the military might of Israel was not enough to suppress Palestinian resistance, the US found it necessary to back up the Israeli war effort with additional political armour, aiming at destabilizing the Palestinian position from within. It is within this framework that Bush's call for reform and restructuring can be understood. This very shrewd move, unlikely to stem from Bush himself, pushed the confrontation to a new dimension.

Factor 1: kidnapping Palestinian will

The United States was well aware of the extent of the Palestinian public's discontent with the performance of the Palestinian Authority in the years following the Oslo agreement. Mismanagement, the granting of lucrative monopolies in many areas of the economy and outright corruption led to a widespread disenchantment. Economic conditions deteriorated, unemployment grew and the expected 'dividends of peace' failed to materialize.

The authoritarian style of the PA, characterized by the refusal to separate the judicial and legislative branches from the executive, resulted in an ineffective judiciary and nearly impotent Legislative Council. Civil society organizations, especially those aligned with the PLO, were neglected.

Political groups, especially the leftist and popular organizations, joined with NGOs in making persistent calls for reforms. Some Palestinian bodies went to the extent of requesting, unsuccessfully, that European donor nations condition their support of the Palestinian Authority on the holding of city and village council elections.

In view of this, the US demand for reform was tantamount to kidnapping the will of the Palestinian people, which had been expressed openly over the years without attracting any attention. Democratic changes within the Palestinian Authority were not welcome at that time. Indeed, with a little help from our friends, the Palestinians could have taken steps toward reform themselves. The US and Israel, and to a certain extent Europe were not only instrumental in creating the authoritarian style of the Palestinian Authority, they were most interested in preserving it.

Factor 2: conditionalities

The United States conditioned its willingness to facilitate a renewal of the 'peace process' on the realization of the reforms. In the meantime, it became apparent that the US was more interested in the reform process than in achieving peace. Sharon was unleashed on the Palestinian people even as the administration spoke of peace, with negotiations to be continued only after the groundwork for settling the Middle East conflict according to the US/Israeli vision had been completed.

Factor 3: pressure from within

The US call for reform became a tool in the hands of the US apologists within the Palestinian Authority. As the aggression against the Palestinian people escalated and daily life became increasingly difficult, this lobby began agitating for an acceptance of the US vision as the only possible solution for the Palestinians. These voices loudly demanded a change in the Palestinian leadership. The US encouraged this trend and called shamelessly for the replacement of President Arafat. They dictated further that there are no more red lines and boycotted Arafat, pressuring other countries to do likewise. Israel kept up Arafat's isolation by besieging and bombarding his compound in Ramallah, with occasional threats to deport him or worse. The United States hoped for a vacuum that would be filled by a lackey of their choosing.

Factor 4: Arab support

The United States is well aware of the impotence of the Arab regimes and their inability to support the Palestinian people. Furthermore, these regimes regarded the Intifada and Palestinian resistance movement as a threat to their own stability. While generally voicing approval of the US vision, they disapproved of the ridiculous and provocative suggestion to replace Arafat, well aware that they themselves could be the next targets for replacement.

Reform and restructuring

All of these factors interacted and gave rise to the slogan 'reform and restructuring', a partial dimension of which was accepted by the Palestinian Authority itself. A series of changes in the structure of the PA were implemented and the security organs were overhauled. The government resigned, and new ministers were appointed. Elections were scheduled for early in 2003, despite uncertainty of how free elections could be held under an occupation amounting to siege conditions. Talk continued of creating the new post of prime minister, relegating Arafat to the role of a largely symbolic honorary president.

The reform and restructuring process as envisaged by the United States administration differed from the Palestinian vision, not only as put forward by the Palestinian Authority itself, but as expressed by national political forces of the opposition. The imperious demands to replace their elected leader moved Palestinians, even those who opposed Arafat, to reject US interference, just as every tightening of the siege of his compound resulted in a surge in his popularity. The US, dissatisfied with the direction Palestinian reforms were taking, allowed Sharon to step up the military pressure on Arafat and continue wearing down Palestinian society through more sieges, curfews and destruction.

The Palestinian vision for reform and restructuring

How do the Palestinian people and the political parties understand the vital process of reforms and restructuring? How does this differ from the US? What are the mechanisms that shape the Palestinian practice?

The Palestinian reality and the aspiration to transform this reality into a viable state are the determining factors, which shape the Palestinian vision for reform. This motivation is completely at odds with US and Israeli goals of reforming the government in order to maintain the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and to cement the US hegemony over the region. For the Palestinians, the reform process is a necessary step towards improving national and social conditions in order to resist the occupation and diminish the political, economic and cultural dependency that the occupation entails.

Thus, the reform process is a part of the resistance movement with its ultimate goal the independence and sovereignty for the Palestinian people in short, liberty.

The reform and restructuring process is a prerequisite for improving the conditions of the Palestinian people by addressing adequately their basic needs at all levels. It is a complex social process within a specific historical framework and given political, economic and cultural conditions.

As such, it is a process of the accumulation of experience in the socio-political arena. The decisive political condition necessary is the ending of the Israeli occupation and the decisive social condition is complete freedom to choose priorities and make decisions according to national interests. Real reform is contingent on these two conditions being met.

Here exactly lies the contradiction between the US/Israeli reform plan and the Palestinian vision. The first is pushing towards increased hegemony and is missing the single most important factor for ensuring acceptance and success, namely democracy. It is for all purposes a colonialist plan, imbued with the policies of oppression, siege, destruction and political isolation.

For this reason, the US demands for reform lack ethical credibility and international legitimacy.

The US vision stems from a particular reality, which has as its base an obsession to control the economical, political, social process and which finds its expression in the philosophy of globalization and the New World Order. The proponents of this philosophy believe that the United States' model of capitalism has already prevailed at all levels (and for all time) and that it is now time to impose the New World Order.

According to that philosophy, the future history of mankind must pass through one compulsory channel, where the US dominates philosophically, economically and politically. All others must be indoctrinated to this vision and have it imposed on them. The United States, unwilling to deal democratically with the interests of the 'other', enforces a violent process by means of military might and economic blackmail to subdue him to the US will. The incidents of September 11 provided the neo-conservatives in the US administration and their right-wing Christian fundamentalist and Zionist henchmen the justification they sought for imposing their will.

The Palestinian Way

The repeated rebellions of the Palestinians in the past 50 years, and in particular during the two Intifadas, embrace an awareness and political will for liberation as well as a progressive dimension to liberate the Palestinian individual and the Palestinian collective at the level of human rights and civil liberties, women's issues, children's rights, education, health, agriculture, social security and worker's rights. There is a profound understanding of the need for an unbiased judicial system that is accountable and transparent. The Palestinians are striving to build a free and democratic civil society.

The Palestinian striving for a free society takes its strength from the history of the Palestinian people. The Naqba (catastrophe) of 1948, the refugee reality, the dispossession, the deportation and killing, the rape of the land and the new and real threat of transfer together form the basis of their legitimate struggle to defend their land and rid themselves of the yoke of Israeli occupation. It is their belief that it is morally and ethically right to resist the occupation. It is their belief that any society has the right to make its own national democratic choices. Progress and socio-political development are not products that can be imported from New York or Tel Aviv.

It is free choice and the accumulated experience that reflect the movement of a society in its uniqueness, civilization, culture and beliefs. Thus, reform and restructuring are an internal social process whose dynamics are to be found in the reality and awareness of a people, and whose results will be reflected in the infrastructure and administration of that society. If this process should be separated from its social incubator, it becomes an alien product and as such, it will be rejected.

Since the early 80s, the reform and restructuring of the different sections within the PLO and later within the Palestinian Authority have been the subject of many discussions and disputes in the Palestinian political forum and later became a fixed point on the agenda at several Palestinian councils.

The Palestinian leftist forces, in particular the Popular Front (PFLP) and the Democratic Front (DFLP), submitted a comprehensive document on reforms that included the political, economic, and administrative structures of the PLO. Early on, the progressive Palestinian forces acknowledged the inconsistencies and weaknesses within the political and organizational structures of the PLO. They were calling for a reformulation of a democratic political system, an end to authoritarianism and monopolistic policies, changing the election code, a separation of the judicial and legislative branches from the executive, the respect of civil liberties and strengthening the civil society years before President Bush demanded these reforms.

These calls were rejected by the conservative forces and authoritarianism within the Palestinian society, who recognized that the democratization process posed a threat to their own interests. The increase of corruption and mismanagement led to further mistrust in the national institutions.

There are three basic attitudes in the Palestinian society regarding the imperious US demands for the reform and restructuring of Palestinian government:

1 The first basically adopted the US vision as inevitable, but is supported only by a small minority among the people and the political cultural elite.

2 The second group, found mainly within the Palestinian Authority and Fatah, endorses the US vision with reservations and some resistance, coupled with pragmatism. On the one hand, these groups have strong historic ties with the Palestinian national movement but on the other hand, the fear of losing any confrontation with the US administration compels them to side with the strong man.

3 A third group opposes the US plan but espouses a reform process as a reflection of an internal Palestinian necessity, regarding it as a democratic prerogative of a free people. This stance is found among the progressive Palestinian forces and in a large portion of the Fatah movement. Since the Islamic parties are also against the US plan, the opponents constitute the majority of the Palestinian society, (irrespective of the profound and deep-seated differences in the social and political concepts between the progressive, the nationalist and the Islamic forces.) The severity of the confrontations with Israel's military might, the assassinations of progressive leaders and the absence of a true democratic system prevent the opponents of the US plan from taking the initiative. The international community has made a point of deliberately ignoring the voices against Bush's reform plans.

The US is well aware of the opposition to its proposals and has no qualms about imposing its vision in a compulsory manner. This, of course, contradicts everything that is said about democracy. As long as the Palestinian people oppose the plans of the US, the US will do its utmost to hinder the development of democracy in the Palestinian society.

The coming Pyrrhic victory

In light of all of these unresolved issues and the ongoing Palestinian/Israeli conflict, what could be the outcome of the clash between the US and Palestinian visions for reform?

Well for one, the US-Israeli alliance could succeed in imposing its vision partially or completely. In doing so, it would merely be creating a system of government in Palestine similar to the ones found depressingly often in the Arab world, particularly in countries friendly to the US. These regimes generally lack popular support and are, in fact, constantly threatened by virtue of having to constantly repress their people.

It will, however, be a Pyrrhic victory. The cultural and historical heritage of Palestinian people, the reality of their experiences under Israeli occupation, would lead one to suppose that the Palestinians would sooner or later rebel against an imposed US reform and restructuring. Inasmuch as compulsory structures for reform are born outside of the societal incubator, the incubator will also bear the tools of resistance to shape the natural course for reforms and restructuring.

The conflict will continue and peace will not prevail until the national rights, the democratic choices and the

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sovereignty of the Palestinian people are recognized and respected. The Palestinian vision arises from the resistance against the crushing of their aspirations and denial of their rights, and thus is an organic part of the democratic forces throughout the world which oppose the inhumane and unjust policies of globalization and US hegemony. The international solidarity movements, in embracing the Palestinian resistance movement, reject the US attempts to forcefully impose its globalization policies and the New World Order on us all.