

Democratization Process Brings Palestinian Politics to a Crossroad

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Palestinian political life seems to be unwittingly embracing a distinctive style, contradicting its own traditional political parameters. The last few weeks clearly attest to this political divergence.

Predictably any serious transformation is not possible without a shakeup in Fatah, the largest political party within the Palestine Liberation Organization.

The late Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat established Fatah in 1959, and it soon became the cornerstone of Palestinian resistance. Palestinian politics were then absorbed by two areas: regional, where the PLO strove to emerge as the sole representative of the Palestinian cause; and internal, where various Palestinian factions competed to define their role within the PLO and the resistance movement as a whole.

Thanks to Arafat, Fatah often emerged on top, but not unscathed. The group had some serious fallouts with Arab states. Contentions also arose among PLO factions, most often against the backdrop of corruption charges, lack of transparency and as a result of Arafat's style of managing the struggle: decisive and domineering.

Every phase of the Palestinian struggle, whether resulting from its own dialectics or responding to regional and international crises and transformations, influenced Palestinian political mechanisms in some way. Nonetheless, a status quo was forming in which Fatah overshadowed the PLO, and regardless of the intensity or seriousness of the surrounding circumstances, nothing could have changed that formula.

Although the PLO's departure from Lebanon — after the Israeli invasion of 1982 — hardly altered Fatah's superior positioning on top of the Palestinian political pyramid, it certainly altered its priorities. With its leaders headquartered in Tunisia, resistance in its direct meaning was to become localized, not exported. In 1987 Palestinians in the occupied territories began their first Intifada, only to be interrupted by the unwarranted and initially secretive signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993.

While various Palestinian factions took on the responsibilities of the 1987 Intifada, Fatah's young members carried a larger share. They successfully renewed faith in the long exiled party, and resurrected its relevance to the struggle altogether. The Tunisia crowd was incapable of offering any practical contributions to the struggle.

It was during these years that the seeds of divergence within Fatah were implanted. It seemed that the party was run by two different leaderships, priorities and, in fact,

objectives. An occupied territories-based “young guard” was being nurtured, most of its members serving years in Israeli jails, while the “old guard” were increasingly perceived with suspicion and mistrust.

Fatah’s unilateral signing of Oslo was a cause for serious friction. But Arafat once again cleverly managed to avert a crisis, though he sidelined most of the PLO’s factions — now based in Damascus — and eventually the PLO entirely.

Arafat, along with a large contingent of the old guard returned from exile in 1994, creating a new political setting, one that was clearly beyond their ability to administer.

Fatah quickly filled the role of a quasi-government: the Palestinian Authority. But the PA was not the PLO. The latter was created under different political circumstances that promised to deliver freedom and victory. The former was at best a dysfunctional self-serving government structure, sanctioned by Israel and funded by various Western countries. The lead management of this structure constituted mostly of “Tunisians,” who in turn represented influential families, the elitists with substantial business clout. The rift was widening.

The fracture within Fatah was overdue. Despite bashful attempts to articulate itself at times, a semi-unity was maintained: One reason was Arafat’s still important presence as the conduit that kept the Fatah ship from being completely submerged into chaos and factionalism. Another was the Hamas challenge and its rise as a potent political, social and resistance force. A third reason was the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising of 2000, which helped espouse relative unity within Fatah and among most Palestinian groups collectively resisting the Israeli occupation.

Arafat’s mysterious death in November 2004 signaled a return to the Fatah turmoil. Mahmoud Abbas survived the first fallout with the young guard when he convinced charismatic Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti — currently serving five terms in Israeli jails — to call off plans to compete in PA presidential elections. After a double scare, Barghouti conceded, leaving the stage for Abbas, now the sole Fatah candidate, to sweep the votes of the Palestinian public.

But the gap grew even wider after Israel unilaterally “disengaged” from Gaza with the hope of consolidating its control over East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Violence in Gaza and charges of corruption everywhere else motioned that a breakdown in the PLO’s largest faction was now imminent. Concurrently, Hamas continued to imprint itself on public opinion as a model of discipline, unity and national responsibility. The group trounced Fatah in recent municipal elections, claiming three of four West Bank cities.

The political plot thickens with the approach of the parliamentary elections Jan. 25. Barghouti finally made the rift in Fatah official when his supporters submitted an alternative list of candidates to contest the elections under a different party name: al-Mustaqbal (the Future).

The move has opened the doors for various dramatic possibilities and has ignited fear that a split in Fatah means a possible Hamas victory. The latter possibility prompted the U.S. House of Representatives to pass a resolution threatening a denial of financial aid to the PA if Hamas is allowed participation.

The European Union has also declared that a Hamas victory will make it difficult for the

organization to maintain its financial support of Palestinians.

Palestinian democracy faces its greatest challenge yet. The Fatah turbulence was not expected to express itself in so dramatic a matter as a decisive divorce between the old and young guard. It is imperative that such turmoil remains confined to the ballot box. Whatever the outcome, Palestinians must not yield to external pressure or internal strife, thus compromising their democratic experience.

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