

In Gaza: Democracy and Its Discontents

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It's all too convenient for the BBC website to describe the ongoing bloodshed between Hamas and Fatah supporters in the Gaza Strip as "inter-factional rivalry", and it's equally fitting for the Washington Post to narrate the same unfortunate events - which have left many Palestinians dead and wounded - as if they are entirely detached from their adjoining regional and international milieus.

Also puzzling are calls made by "leading moderate Arab leaders" to fighting Palestinian factions to convene in this Arab capital or that to settle their differences and to achieve an increasingly elusive ceasefire, as if they, the Arabs - who cowed to US pressure to ensure the success of the debilitating sanctions imposed against the democratic Palestinian governments - haven't contributed, actively and knowingly to the unfolding crisis in Palestine.

This is all but atypical, where Palestinians will be gently or harshly reprimanded for failing to sort out their differences in a more civilized manner, where they will be taught a lesson or two by some self-righteous American commentators about the true meaning of democracy, where they will be reminded that they are "their own worst enemies" and that they never "miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." Nonsense.

What is taking place in the Occupied Territories, particularly in the Gaza Strip has much less to do with inter-factional rivalries and a lot more with regional and international power plays, in which some foolhardy Palestinians decided to involve themselves for the sake of maintaining personal and factional gains.

To avoid delving into self-pity, I wish to emphasize a point that I have made repeatedly in the past: if it were not for the dysfunctional nature and lack of unity within the myriad of political and societal structures that claims to represent the Palestinian people, no political designs, be it American or Israeli or any other, would've succeeded in duping the Palestinians into such caustic behaviour and self-defeatism. (The gunning down of three kids on December 11 and the killing of other innocent people, including children, in addition to the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Ismail Haniya on December 14, have indeed crossed all red lines, even by the shabby standards of ideological gangsterism.)

Self-admonishment aside, however, one must not be too hasty to conclude that the newest episode of violence witnessed in Gaza - following PA President Mahmoud Abbas's suggestion of early polls on December 9, and then his televised speech revealing his intention to hold early legislative and presidential elections on December 14 - was a spur of the moment event, incited by lack of discipline on the part of a few rouge elements. Rather, it's a facet of the thus-far unsuccessful, prolonged coup d'état to topple the Palestinian government, which was declared candidly by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, demanded by

Israel, and entrusted to President Abbas and some factions within his discredited Fatah party, following Hamas' advent to power in the internationally monitored and transparent elections held January 2006.

Those who might find it justifiable to outset a 'theocratic' regime by any means necessary, even by an assassin's bullet, fail to realize that despite Hamas' religious posture, it has done very little so far to divert from the dictates of democracy. To the contrary, they seem more keen on adhering to the secular Palestinian constitution than Abbas himself, whose call to disband the parliament is both anti-democratic and unconstitutional.

Indeed, this is not a war between religious zealots and democratic secularists; far from it. However, it's a battle of many meanings, each tailored and defined to suit the interests and manage the concerns of the many parties involved, and indeed, they are not all Palestinians.

Hamas did not come to power at the back of an American tank, like more or less the pro-Washington regime in Iraq, or via an Israeli sanctioned and armed political system of corruption and elitism, like the one concocted following the signing of Oslo in 1993. It neither imposed nor manipulated its way to power. It was the outcome of an overwhelming democratic process, ironically enough, a part of America's democratic drive in the Middle East, itself a distraction from its horrendous failures in Iraq.

So what went wrong?

The election of Hamas sent shock waves across the Middle East, for it offered an Islamic alternative that didn't defy the norms of democracy, but seemed capable of locating a method for a lasting union between the two, unlike the Algerian example, which inspired the most destructive civil war.

Second, it crippled the Bush administration's 'vision' of democracy in the Middle East, one that is cemented with the assumption that pro-America's regional allies can possibly achieve a façade of democracy without any major overhauling of their political systems that might endanger US interests. The Iraqi and Egyptian presidential elections were hoped to be the models to follow, not that of Hamas.

Third, Hamas' win, mostly based on its anti-corruption ticket, has threatened to destroy and filter out an utterly corrupt political system that the Palestinian Authority's echelons have enjoyed, with full Israeli backing. (It's rather telling that the US and the EU didn't mind feeding that corrupt system, but withheld their funds when another system that vowed to cleanse the corruption was elected in its place.) The authority's structure, as constructed by Oslo, has produced one of the most corrupt and corruptible political regimes, with full reliance on American and European aid, money that barely tricked down on the oppressed multitudes (who were stricken to a much greater degree by the Israeli occupiers and their Palestinian beneficiaries.)

Palestinians had no illusions that electing a government under occupation doesn't change the status quo of their beleaguered lives, but it could, they hoped, bring an end to the nepotistic system espoused at home, which also saw no particular urgency in ending the Israeli occupation.

The Bush administration, which immediately toned down its democracy rhetoric following

the Palestinian elections was hell-bent on toppling Hamas. Although for Israel no matter who is at the Palestinian helm, Israel can never admit to having a trustworthy peace partner (for Israel it has always been about winning time, rather than achieving peace), the Israelis seemed to be enjoying and had actively exasperated Palestinian chaos for it represented an historical opportunity to consume Palestinians in endless internal strife, and even better, a civil war. And as the Arabs followed Washington's orders and as the Europeans waited for further instructions (so much for the European alternative peace broker), Palestinians fell into the trap, turning one of the shiniest moments for democracy in the region, to one of extreme irony, agony and possible defeat.

It is decidedly clear that the policy planners in Washington and Tel Aviv have converged on the need for a prolonged era of Palestinian infighting and to eventually topple the government; it's also clear that Abbas and his followers have agreed to play their entrusted roles, as have many Arab rulers. I desperately want to conclude with the claim that Palestinians will once again withstand this harsh, cruel test, and win with their unity and democracy unscathed; but after what I have seen in the last a few days, and being convinced of the extent of the American experiment that stretches far beyond the crowded streets of besieged, impoverished Gaza, I am no longer certain that they will. But if they fail, so will true democracy and its advocates, for the word would then be devoid of any meaning, and would once again be demoted to resemble another usual US charade, as it always has.

Ramzy Baroud's latest book is *The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle* (Pluto Press) is available at Amazon.com and also from the University of Michigan Press. He can be contacted via his www.ramzybaroud.net

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