

The Palestinian Left: A Lost Opportunity for Relevance

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When Hamas members were elected as the majority bloc of the Palestinian Legislative Council, and as it became apparent that a US-led international embargo would be an adjoining price to that victory, I contacted many intellectuals and writers in Palestine, mostly those who often positioned themselves as part of the Palestinian Left. I asked them to solidify behind the collective choice of the Palestinian people and to shield Palestinian democracy at any cost.

An exact paragraph in my appeal was the following: “This is the first time in our history that a leadership is chosen from our midst to lead the way forward, chosen by our downtrodden, poor and dispossessed. I have no illusions that the current Parliament is not an expression of a truly democratic experience since no true democracy can take roots under occupation, and I am equally clear on the fact that the Council doesn’t represent but a minority of our people, but there is no denial in the fact that there is a great hope in seeing refugees, members of humble families, elementary school teachers and the working class claiming their rightful position as community leaders. Regardless of how the US wishes to interpret such a collective act, it is important that we defend it by articulating the realities in Palestine as they are, not as the mainstream media so readily misrepresents it.”

This was in response to my initial reading that the Hamas government was losing the battle at the media front. The reason was simple: they possessed neither the experience nor the even-handed platform to reach out to international media to articulate their position in any convincing shape or form. Knowing this, and also aware of the political polarization in Palestine, I feared that the battle of articulation would be formulated around the theme of Hamas vs. Fatah, or Islamic government vs secularism, which indeed proved to be the case.

As someone who defines himself as a secular humanist, I didn’t interpret the debate in Palestine as such, and I believe the bulk of Palestinian intellectuals in Diaspora – something I am very proud of – also used a similar line of logic: the debate for me was that of genuine democracy facing early abortion as a result of a most sinister union that brought together many world governments, Israel and corrupt Palestinians. Nonetheless, the irate response was comprehensible. The Palestinian vote was a collective act of epic proportions that eradicated, almost instantly, the Bush administration’s charade of the Great Middle East Democracy Project, itself an extension of the old New Middle East Project of the late 1990’s. The US government tailored a specific project, which included a pretence democracy which would serve its long-term interests in the region and position itself as the protector of the people’s will for many years to come, now that its declared aims in Iraq completely faltered.

Internally, the elections also meant that Palestinians — terrorized for six decades by the Israeli army, and as of late, by the Israel-backed Palestinian ‘security’ branches and their warlord-like bosses — still possessed the strength to fight back and insist on their right to defy the status quo. It was one of the most potent non-violent victories achieved by the Palestinian people, compared only to their First Uprising of 1987.

Following the elections, the movement’s leadership insisted on governing in accordance to the norms of democracy and civil society, and quickly issued calls for all Palestinian groups to join in forming a unity government.

Fatah refused. No surprises there. But why did the so-called Palestinian Left refuse to take part in the government as well — despite their insignificant popularity among Palestinians — an act that could’ve served Palestinian democracy in more ways than one?

In the early weeks and months, following Hamas’ lonely ascent to power in March 2006, we began seeing respected Palestinian intellectuals making some disturbing statements to the media, attacking Hamas as if it’s some alien body, shipped from Tehran, and thus, affectively, validating the international embargo. I had, at times, shared stage with many of those people, proudly, at international forums; some even posed as socialists and spoke fervently of the collective fight against international imperialism and the need to activate civil society in the fight against injustice and so forth. The Hamas victory had indeed exposed the chasm between words and actions, between national priorities and ideological and even individual rigidity and limitations. When Hamas entered into rounds of talks with Palestinian ‘socialist’ groups, I was most certain that the latter would appreciate the intensity of the challenge and would take part in a unity government even if a union with a religious grouping stands at odds with its overall principals. I thought, the situation is too grave for superficial manifestos and party programs to stand in the way. I was wrong.

Following the armed resistance of the 1970’s in Gaza, led, partly, by various socialist groups, there was no truly popular left that appealed to a large segment of the Palestinian popular imagination. Although some of these groups held on truly principled stances opposing Oslo, for example, they remained largely confined to university campuses, spotted in urban centres as artists, academics and middle class — and sometimes upper class — intellectuals.

The bizarre twist is that Hamas, by a practical definition, is much closer to socialist principals than the urban ‘socialist’ intellectuals.

By defending Hamas and the democratic will of Palestinians, I’ve hardly felt as if I was deviating from my own principles. My letter to the Palestinian Left hardly generated any response — my communications with progressives in the West generated much greater enthusiasm. Now that the split between Hamas and Fatah has elevated to almost a geographic split as well — a complete departure from the Palestinian national objectives, many in the Left are still parroting old mantras, still fighting for irrelevant appearances on BBC, making demands on Hamas and using such terms as a ‘coup against Palestinian democracy’.

There was hardly a Palestinian Left to begin with; they lost the only opportunity that could’ve made them relevant, and now they continue to pander to the status quo, yet posing as the wise ones in an ocean of dim-witted multitudes: the precise definition of intellectual elitism.

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