

## **Reform as Resistance**

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*The Palestine Chronicle*, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2006

The word 'reform' has rarely been so common a part of the discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Whether wielded by Israel and the 'Quartet' as a stick with which to beat the Palestinian Authority (PA), or the key slogan of the victorious Hamas' election campaign, everyone is talking about 'reform'. The fact that it is used in such different contexts and by such diverse actors is enough to warrant an examination of 'reform' as it is applied in the Palestinian context.

In the last few years Israel has continued its time-honored practice of establishing facts on the ground, unhindered in part due to its stalling tactics in the remaining vestiges of a 'peace process'. The typical argument has been that there can be no progress in negotiations or concessions until the Palestinians, one, 'reform' their institutions and purge the corruption from the PA, and two, 'rein in the militants'.

The implications of these demands have almost been rendered irrelevant by the spirit in which they are repeated – to distract from the main issues of occupation and rapacious land confiscation. 'Reform' and disarmament became the tests the Palestinians are intended to fail, foiling even feeble efforts at energizing negotiations.

One of the consequences of this abuse of the concept of reform was that those who raised the issue in good faith became open to accusations of advancing a 'Zionist' agenda, and the topic (perhaps unconsciously) was left on the sidelines by activists and advocates. Yet this granted the Israelis one more victory, since by cooperating, albeit unwittingly, in the debasement of the question of 'reform', an opportunity was missed to greatly strengthen the Palestinian struggle.

It is useful to set out exactly what is meant by 'reform', though in this article more by way of questions than answers.

Firstly, reform relates to the governmental institutions of the PA and the structure of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO); in other words, a fundamental reassessment of post-Oslo assumptions and methods. The Oslo years were built on a basic misnomer – that the PA was a government-in-waiting, and that 'Area A' had even a passing resemblance to a genuine sovereign state, or was moving in that direction.

The second Intifada has in some way served to unmask the deception, and lay bare the realities of occupation, yet the representatives of the Palestinian people at the highest levels still operate within a system that has the symbols of statehood for a people still in the colonial moment. In addition, until very recently, the internal Palestinian political dynamic had led Fatah, intoxicated with power, to become a byword for misjudgment

and malpractice. A leadership and organizational framework that best represents the needs and interests of a society seeking national liberation needs to be allowed to flourish, unrestricted by Oslo straitjackets.

Palestinian society has substantial democratic foundations, and a flourishing civil society. As some more astute commentators have pointed out in the aftermath of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) elections, the Palestinians have just conducted perhaps the freest and most democratic election in the Middle East; elections that follow hard on the heels of equally transparent voting at the presidential and municipal levels. Palestine is awash with both indigenous and foreign NGOs, a rich resource to tap for any future Palestinian state, yet so far there has often been a disparity between the professionalism and integrity exhibited by civil society, and Palestinian officials.

A second aspect of reform relates to the resistance groups and proliferation of arms. On the one hand, it is worth repeating that collective self-defense and resistance to occupation is legitimate in international law and in precedent. However, currently there is no uniform strategy, or unity amongst factions, about either aims or methods.

Furthermore, localized militias and families have often seen fit to try and solve a variety of problems through the gun, a tactic used more for shock than out of malicious intent perhaps, but still undesirable. At the end of the day, the ones who will suffer from an easy recourse to violence are Palestinians themselves, and the legacy for the unborn could be social disintegration.

Hamas' recent electoral success could well represent a chance for the rehabilitation of 'reform' by friends and campaigners for Palestine. By so dramatically capitalizing on the frustrations of Palestinians with their own representatives, Hamas' win has meant that 'reform', rather than being purely a hollow cry of Washington and Tel Aviv, can become integral to the national struggle: reform is resistance. The election has also acted a slap in the face to the Fatah party, a shock that could lead to good things in the future, should it be assessed sensibly and humbly.

Palestinian society, from the highest political echelons to the resistance groups and regular citizens, will be in a stronger position to reclaim the initiative, and positively resist colonization, when serious reform is embraced. The dissipated Intifada, Gaza disengagement, the Separation Wall, and the parliamentary elections, all point to a new phase that might be best approached with a focus on internal matters. Palestinians can reclaim the concept and practices of reform, without fearing pandering to an agenda that is far from having the best interests' of the Palestinian people at heart.