

Elections without Democracy

By Sam Bahour and Todd May | January 3, 2005

During the 1970s, the apartheid government of South Africa sought to bolster its claims to legitimacy by allowing elections in the Bantustans—the equivalent to today’s walled-in Palestinian communities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The thought was that if people elected local officials, even to hold largely ceremonial offices, then the rest of the world would stop whining about how undemocratic and illegal apartheid was.

There were two problems with this strategy. First, the world understood that ceremonial elections do not make a democracy. Second, the major candidate in any election who would be endorsed by black South Africans—Nelson Mandela—was being held in a South African prison. Instead, black South Africans were being offered collaborator candidates who were chosen by the white South African government.

Through its policy of “constructive engagement,” however, the Reagan administration tacitly endorsed this strategy, even when Congress resisted by passing the Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986.

How little has changed. Except for the lack of congressional resistance, the situation in the Israeli-occupied territories mirrors that of apartheid South Africa. Palestinians are being forced, either by choice or fate, to agree to “acceptable” candidates for elections to offices that will have only as much power as the Israeli government, underwritten by the Bush administration, grants.

Consider the ceremonial character of the offices for which any Palestinian would be running. The Palestinian infrastructure has been decimated by 37 years of military occupation and, more recently, the Israeli invasion of 2002 and subsequent military incursions. Palestinians do not control the resources that lie on their land. Their streets are patrolled by a foreign army and their movements limited by humiliating checkpoints. There are not even recognized borders for this land over which the legislators will have no legislative control. In short, for those who would receive the honor of being elected to a Palestinian democratic institution, there will be nothing to legis-

late, nothing to be legislated over, and no resources with which to legislate. This is the democracy Palestinians are being offered.

And there is more. Not only was the last elected president of the Palestinian people forced to languish until his death under permanent house arrest, two current Palestinian Legislative Council members, who were supposed to be immune from Israeli interference, currently reside in Israeli jails for their political leadership. Along with these two political prisoners, over 7,000 Palestinian prisoners remain detained by Israel, many of them leaders of their communities.

Say what one will, both apartheid South Africa and Israel have recognized leaders when they have seen them.

Eventually, South Africa stopped the bloodshed on its land by reversing the historic injustice caused to blacks in South Africa. Israel, on the other hand, seems not only blind to the future Palestinian leaders, but has refused even to acknowledge the growing number of its own citizens who are choosing to be jailed instead of serving the Israeli occupation.

Calls for democratization among the Palestinians serve the wider purposes of the Sharon and Bush administrations. Such calls hint that the problem lies not in the occupation of Palestinian land but in the political character of the Palestinian people. If we are not ready for democracy, as defined by our occupier and its funder, then perhaps, they reason, the occupation can justifiably continue.

However, the Palestinian people, and much of the world besides, understand the difference between an



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empty democracy and the real thing. If Palestinians have been so slow to ratify the institutional trappings that have recently been offered to them, if they seem to balk at the “generosity” shown by the Israelis and the Americans, perhaps the fault does not lie solely with the Palestinians. Perhaps it is because what Palestinians seek is true independence on their own

land over which they have effective control. In other words, a democracy.

Sam Bahour <sbahour@palnet.com> is a Palestinian-American living in Ramallah and Todd May <tkdrjmay@aol.com> is a professor of philosophy at Clemson University; both are frequent contributors to Foreign Policy In Focus (www.fpif.org).

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