

Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat clamps down on his critics

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More than a thousand people demonstrated in the northern West Bank town of Nablus Saturday to protest the crackdown carried out by the Palestinian Authority (PA) against signatories of a petition criticising Yassir Arafat and the Palestinian regime. Only a day earlier police had blocked a planned rally.

Twenty prominent Palestinian activists, academics and members of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) put their names to the petition, which accused Arafat of “opening the doors for opportunists to spread corruption throughout the Palestinian community.”

The petition denounced the “corruption, deceit and despotism” that has followed upon the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which established the PA.

Six years after Oslo and Palestinian self-rule, “More lands are robbed while settlements expand. The conspiracy against the refugees accelerates behind the scenes. Palestinian jails close their doors to our own sons and daughters. Jerusalem has not returned and Singapore has not arrived. The people are divided into two groups: that of the select who rule and steal, and that of the majority which complains and searches for someone to save it,” the petition asserted.

The response of the Arafat regime was to order the Palestinian intelligence service to arrest eight of the signatories and impose house arrest on three others. At his prodding, the PLC held a special session and censured those who signed the petition. Arafat has threatened to lift the immunity of PLC members so that the nine legislators who endorsed the document could also be arrested.

On his way back from the four-hour PLC session December 1, one of the signatories, Mu'awiyya Al Masri, a legislator and physician, was attacked by masked gunmen and shot in the leg. Al Masri addressed the Saturday rally. He declared, “What happened will not make me go back—it will make me go forward.”

The critics of the PA regime come from the Palestinian establishment and are committed to the peace process with Israel. They include members of Arafat's own party, Fatah, and are historically linked to the Palestinian national struggle. One is Bassam Shaka'a, a former mayor of Nablus, who lost both his legs in a terrorist attack by Zionist settlers more than 20 years ago. Another is Ahmed Qatamesh, a prominent author and intellectual, wanted for 15 years by the Israelis. He was the longest Palestinian Administrative Detainee in Israeli prisons serving over 66 months without trial.

The conditions under which those arrested are being held are

unknown. The Palestinian Authority has begun a media campaign against the petition, suggesting that its signers are aiding the enemies of the Palestinian people.

Every Palestinian university has held strikes in protest, as have the secondary schools. Many political factions, including Fatah, have denounced the PA's attacks on the signatories to the petition.

According to the Alternative Information Center in Israel, a follow-up statement, apparently by the 20 or their supporters, calls for “Palestinians to confront and put an end to tyranny”, “take control of the security forces”, “prosecute collaborators and traitors” and “withdrawal of trust of traitors and sellers of land in the Ministry Councils”. These developments are symptomatic of growing opposition to the Palestinian Authority. There have been countless protests against the PA's brutality and corruption.

According to the 1999 Amnesty International Report, in 1998 in areas controlled by the PA, more than 450 people were arrested for political reasons, including prisoners of conscience. More than 500 remained in detention without charge or trial from previous years. People were serving prison terms after grossly unfair trials. Torture and ill treatment were widespread. Three have died in custody under conditions where torture and ill treatment must have contributed to their deaths. Illegal killings continue. The report said that investigations into human rights abuses had not been published.

According to Bassem Eid of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, 150 of Arafat's political opponents have been rounded up and held without trial after Palestinian security forces were tipped off by the Israelis. Another 500 have been placed in administrative detention for criminal offences or allegedly collaborating with Israel. Dozens of suspected members of Islamist groups have been locked up after being rushed through the state security courts. Suspects are often snatched from home for lightning midnight trials, without being allowed to see a lawyer.

Last October, judges went on strike to protest against political interference by the PA in the judicial system. Last June, Arafat appointed a new Chief Justice to the Palestinian Supreme Court, nearly 18 months after his predecessor was fired for complaining about political interference. The Palestinian media, which prior to Oslo was relatively free, is now subject to numerous restrictions. All the newspapers have been subject to closures, including the loyalist papers, *Al-Quds* and *An-Nahar*. Editors dare not speak out for fear of repercussions.

Only a few weeks ago, a TV chat show host explained how he

had been arrested and jailed for 20 days by the Palestinian security forces because guests on his programme criticised the PA for failing to secure the release of their sons from Israeli jails. The TV host said that during his stay in prison he was tortured. He was blindfolded and shackled in a painful position and called a collaborator with Israel. Other prisoners were abused. At 2 o'clock in the morning, he could hear screaming and beating of prisoners, he said.

Books by Professor Edward Said, the well-known Palestinian scholar and professor of literature at Columbia University in New York City, have been banned, adding to the list of attacks by the PA on basic democratic rights. Two of the books, written in Arabic, include articles sharply critical of the 1993 Oslo Agreement. Said, who until Oslo had been a close ally of Arafat and a member of the Palestinian parliament-in-exile, declared that the agreement was an "instrument of Palestinian surrender" and that Arafat had agreed to become "Israel's enforcer". Since then, Said has frequently accused Arafat of running an incompetent, brutal and corrupt regime.

Popular protests thus far have largely focused on the PA's ministers and the police, despite the fact nothing the PA says or does goes ahead without Arafat's say-so. Now the reluctance to criticise Arafat, out of deference to his historic role in the national liberation struggle, has been brushed aside. For the first time, prominent Palestinians in Palestine have come out and openly criticised Arafat, as the social and economic conditions facing the broad mass of the people have declined.

The high hopes that peace and the normalisation of economic relations would bring prosperity were soon dashed. Constant restrictions on travel and border "closures" by the Israeli security forces have affected jobs and trade and wrecked the economy.

"Economic conditions have deteriorated, community relations have loosened. Health, education and judiciary institutions have been brought to ruin," the petition declared.

The percentage of workers commuting to Israel fell from 33 percent in 1992 to 21 percent in 1998. Unemployment has officially remained above 20 percent, while underemployment is officially about 10 percent, but is undoubtedly much higher. In 1994, Israel implemented non-tariff barriers and prevented the export of agricultural goods to Israel.

According to World Bank estimates, Israeli closures have cost the Palestinian economy \$6-10 million a day. The prolonged closures since 1993 have cut incomes, tax collection and investment, raised farmers' costs and created huge surpluses. The net result has been a substantial drop in living standards on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The IMF estimates that income per head has fallen by 25 percent. A recent study by the Palestinian Economic Research Institute (MAS) found that at least 19 percent of the population were "poor"—10 percent in the West Bank and 36 percent in the Gaza Strip—with an average annual per capita expenditure of \$650.

With half the population less than 16 years of age, schools are grossly overcrowded. Healthcare facilities, particularly secondary and mental healthcare, are inadequate. The number of hospital beds has not risen for 20 years and is low by WHO standards.

The West Bank and Gaza rely on groundwater for their water

supply, which they share with Israel and the Zionist settlements. Since usage exceeds natural replenishment, supplies have become saline, and are polluted by sewage and chemicals. Only half the rural population has access to piped drinking water. Domestic water consumption averages only 93 litres a day, compared to 280 in Israel. The situation had deteriorated even further with the recent drought affecting the entire region.

Far from bringing peace and an improvement in living standards, the Oslo Accords and subsequent "land for peace" deals with Israel have only intensified the misery of the Palestinian people. Under the agreements, the PA security services are obliged to "act systematically against all expressions of [Palestinian] violence and terror" and "arrest and prosecute [Palestinian] individuals suspected of perpetrating acts of violence and terror". While they must co-operate with Israeli security forces, they are not "in any circumstances" allowed to arrest or detain Israelis—despite the Israelis' right of movement throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

The eventual extension of the PA's territorial base is directly related to the degree to which it protects the security of Israel and the Israeli settlers. The establishment of a "strong police force" is one of the few powers accorded to the PA. The Palestinian territory now has a staggering ratio of one policeman for every 50 members of the population, the highest in the world. Funded by the US and the international banks, the security forces consume the overwhelming proportion of its limited budget.

A strong PA police and intelligence force was one of Israel's preconditions for any move towards "self rule." Creating an internal Palestinian security force to replace the 100,000-strong Israeli army in the Occupied Territories was one of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's main motives for backing the Oslo Accords in 1993.

"The Palestinians will be better at it than we were," he said in September 1993, "because they will allow no appeals to the Supreme Court and will prevent the Israeli Association of Civil Rights from criticising the conditions thereby denying it access to the area. They will rule by their own methods, freeing, and this is most important, the Israeli army soldiers from having to do what they will do."

Numerous police forces gave Arafat enormous scope for political and financial patronage. But 40,000 police are not required to ensure the economic, social and political development of the 2.6 million people in the new Palestinian "entity", rather to keep the lid on the people in the absence of such development.



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