

PALESTINE: Arafat Facing Serious Challenge From His Own People

By IPS Correspondents Reprint

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RAMALLAH, West Bank, Apr 4 1996 (IPS) - After weeks of a concerted crackdown aimed at routing out Islamic extremists, Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority is finding itself facing an angry and disillusioned public.

Anger has been building among Palestinians dissatisfied with the outcome of peace negotiations with Israel, which as they see it, has led only to unemployment, suffering, Israeli raids, land confiscation, and expanded Israeli settlements.

Now, after weeks of mass arrests by their own security forces and, some students allege, tortured by them, Palestinians are channeling their anger in a new direction — toward Arafat himself.

"There is really a serious crisis," said Palestinian political researcher Hisham Ahmed, who has written a book about the fundamentalist Hamas organisation's role in Palestinian society called *From Religious Salvation to Political Transformation: The Role of Hamas in Palestinian Society*.

"Arafat is in trouble and I don't think that this crisis was caused by Arafat himself," Ahmed said. "Unfortunately, for all sorts of reasons, the Palestinian Authority has not been able to meet public expectations."

At a demonstration outside a Ramallah prison in support of 'democracy', said the students who planned it, Arafat was for the first time greeted with angry shouts of 'collaborator' — an almost unthinkable and unprecedented epithet to come from Palestinians.

In response, Arafat interrupted the first day of a two-day parliament session Wednesday to speak to 32 student representatives of most West Bank universities. He promised to rein in more closely monitor his police, and post guards at universities to prevent disturbances.

Then he flew to Nablus Thursday in a bid to quell discontent in that northern West Bank city.

Nablus was the site of the first open clash between students and security forces in the West Bank when, last week, police stormed the hilltop campus where a pro-Hamas rally was taking place, and sprayed tear gas, opened fire, and injured several students.

The immediate trouble began after a string of suicide bombings in Israel at the end of last month sent Israeli and Palestinian security forces hunting for the Islamic extremists responsible.

Israel responded by imposing its toughest closure on the West Bank and Gaza ever, preventing goods, people and medicines from entering or exiting both areas and enforcing an internal closure on the West Bank that trapped Palestinians wherever they were.

Under pressure from Israel and the U.S., Arafat also ordered a crackdown on the militant organisation, arresting several hundred and outlawing their military wings.

Then, as part of its 'get tough' policy, Israel raided the West Bank's Bir Zeit University, rounding up some 300 students from Gaza who were studying there 'illegally', jailing some and shipping the others to Gaza.

All this spells trouble for Arafat's nascent self-rule government, analysts predict.

“The gaps between Palestinian civil society and the Palestinian (leadership) has been widened tremendously,” says Ahmed. “There has been a loss of credibility of the PNA.”

Several Palestinian intellectuals, including the renowned Palestinian-American writer Edward Said, warned of the possibility that the Palestinian Authority might eventually lose the trust of its people when the Oslo agreement first surfaced.

And this week, Hamas, capitalising on public disillusionment with Arafat, for the first time directed its threats to a weakened Palestinian government, promising to retaliate with more bus bombs in Israel — and against the Palestinian Authority itself.

A few months ago, when Palestinian expectations for its new self- rule government were high, Hamas would never have issued such threats, says Ahmed.

“Hamas is really setting the stage for an internal Palestinian conflict,” he said. “I think it’s the most dangerous period Palestinian society will go through.”