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A PALESTINIAN VIEW
Lessons from South Africa

by Hisham Ahmed

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Palestinians and their supporters often cite South African apartheid when trying to illustrate the conditions the Palestinian people are living under. The wall that is being built up and down occupied Palestinian territory is thus known as the apartheid wall, and, just recently, President Yasser Arafat invoked South Africa when, in an interview with the London-based al Sharq al Awsat newspaper, he said he would be happy to do as Nelson Mandela did and step aside for a new generation of leaders, but only, as in the case of South Africa, when nationhood is achieved.

Indeed, the South African apartheid system does exhibit a number of similarities to the system installed by the Israeli government to rule Palestinians under occupation. To give but one, perhaps the most obvious example, Palestinians in the occupied territories live under one law, military law, while Israeli settlers in the same occupied territories live under another, civil Israeli law.

Since 1948, Israel has been using what are known as emergency regulations that were originally devised by the British Mandate authorities, ironically, at times to be used by the British against the Jews. These emergency laws were used for years against the Palestinian population inside the green line and, since the occupation of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, are still applied in occupied Palestinian territory.

The rules give all legal power to the Israeli military governor vis-a-vis the occupied Palestinian population under his rule, unlike the settlers in occupied territory who are subject to Israeli civilian police. Thus a Palestinian will be put before a military court (if he goes to court and is not simply placed in administrative detention), while an Israeli settler will retain his full civil and political rights before a civil court.

In general, while Israel likes to portray itself as a country ruled by law, the fact remains that for Palestinians, the Israeli courts are the chief instruments through which torture and discrimination against them are institutionalized. And in this vein there are many other instances of obvious discrimination that are remarkably similar to the apartheid era (compare settler-only roads to white-only restaurants, or the "right of return" of Jews who have never been to the country while Palestinian refugees indigenous to the country linger in exile, etc.).

But there are also important differences. The black South African struggle was one for equal rights in one country. While some Palestinians would advocate a similar struggle here, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has become primarily one over the creation of two separate states, or rather a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

And while the struggle against apartheid was a struggle for equal social and political rights, the Palestinian struggle, in addition to that, is also an existential struggle. The current Israeli prime minister is the first ever to publicly state that he would accept a Palestinian state, but on the ground he is doing his best to ensure that such a thing cannot become a reality by isolating Palestinians into cantons and imposing his own vision of what land such a state can be built on.

Finally, the apartheid regime existed while there was still a global balance of power. Today's unipolar world is held entirely in the sway of the world's single hegemon, the United States. And the US is Israel's staunchest supporter. While black South Africans received crucial solidarity from sectors of American society for whom the civil rights movement was a defining and greatly empowering phenomenon, no equivalent exists for the Palestinians.

Herein lies a major problem for Palestinians. While a number of pressures led to the end of the apartheid regime, a crucial one was the international isolation and economic sanctions that were eventually imposed on that country. Palestinians have tried, and continue to try to convince the international community that a similar course of action with regards to Israel would be an effective way of finally solving this conflict. But as long as the US continues successfully to block such efforts, via its veto power in the United Nations Security Council or direct pressure on a number of countries--and as the only global power the US can dictate and determine how political processes unfold--it is an avenue of pressure that will be closed off to Palestinians.

In short, while both apartheid South Africa and the Israeli occupation are similar in the desire shown by one people to control the indigenous other of a given country and the lengths to which they would go to crush the will of their targeted populations, the Palestinians must also understand the differences in the two cases to better achieve their national rights. Thus, while apartheid South Africa might provide a fairly accurate comparison to illustrate the plight of the Palestinian people, it does not necessarily provide the model upon which action should be emulated. Palestinians need to be creative to fight for their rights in the context of the particularities of their situation, which in certain crucial aspects are different from apartheid.- Published 25/10/2004 (c) bitterlemons.org

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