

Social Struggle and the Crisis of the Palestinian Left Parties

Tariq Dana

Following the Oslo accords of 1993, structural changes have imperiled the socioeconomic conditions of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). These changes are defined by a radical shift in the political economy of the oPt whereby the complex interplay between the policies of donor-backed Palestinian Authority's (PA) neoliberalism and Israeli colonialism introduced excessive forms of social exclusion, economic inequality and led to unparalleled fragmentation of the Palestinian social fabric. Amid this dynamic, the Palestinian left parties that historically constituted militant forces in advancing progressive social agendas and in organizing myriad forms of social struggle as part of the national liberation struggle have critically declined. The long-standing crisis of the Palestinian left has not only left the post-Oslo repressive socioeconomic dynamic unchallenged, but also, more perilously, Palestinian left parties - consciously or unconsciously - became hostage, if not acquiescent to this status quo.

Pre-Oslo momentum of social struggle

Since the emergence of modern Palestinian left parties, the question of social struggle was conceived as integral to the overall national liberation struggle. Palestinian left parties' understanding of social reality was informed by Marxist philosophy, which emphasized the centrality of overcoming class exploitation and achieving social justice as a prerequisite for national liberation. This understanding was articulated in the party programs and strategies and was translated into concrete action on the ground. Accordingly, Palestinian left parties represented active forces in the global anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist camp, which perceived Israel's colonial venture as an antithesis of social emancipation and self-determination.

As part of the strategy to form a resistant institutional infrastructure in the oPt, the left parties managed to establish a sophisticated network of grassroots movements during the 1970s and 1980s. These movements functioned closely with political parties and social constituencies in almost every locality. The grassroots approach proved effective, particularly because it helped develop an indigenously-oriented vision to identify social struggle agendas and therefore to introduce proper mechanisms for social and economic resistance. Interestingly, social struggle had twofold directions; first a struggle against the socio-economic injustices enforced by the Israeli occupation, and second an internal social struggle for progressive social change that aimed to sideline reactionary social structures such as the patriarchal and tribal authorities.

Left parties' effort was materializing in the years before Oslo, particularly during the First Intifada (1987-1992). Concerning the socioeconomic struggle, leftist organizations embraced three consistent mechanisms that proved essential to support local communities' steadfastness and collective empowerment: 1) to offer a politicized form of service provision that addressed the root cause of socioeconomic grievances rather than a passive humanitarianism, 2) to nurture public awareness of political, social and economic issues, and 3) to invest in grassroots mobilization in order to transform people's grievances into concrete collective action and organized popular resistance¹. In addition, the First Intifada implied a "social revolution" evident in the emancipatory patterns of social change. This dynamism was such 'an internal revolution of children against fathers, women against husbands, poor against rich, refugees against the propertied classes'². A significant observation of the First Intifada's "social revolution" was embodied in the gradual erosion of the tribal-patriarchal authority, which was challenged by the socially marginalized groups, namely women and youth³.

Post-Oslo crisis of social struggle

Unlike previous decades, the Oslo era has seen dramatic deterioration in the ways Palestinian left parties relate to the social reality and react to the socioeconomic malaise. Social struggle, both in theory and practice, has crucially recoiled. In the first stance, the formation of the PA and the accompanying neoliberal governance and its interaction with Israel's colonial reality have produced a highly repressive status quo whereby rising unemployment, poverty, economic suffocation, social exclusion and food insecurity, all of which became an integral feature of the Oslo era⁴. Furthermore, while the Oslo process led the Palestinians to lose politically and be worse off at the socio-economic level, a narrow segment of the Palestinian elite have been benefiting from the status quo and exploiting the state-building project as a major source of personal enrichment⁵. This reality has been conducive

to unparalleled levels of economic inequality and social fragmentation characterized by an ever-increasing class division and systemic exploitation of the labor force within the Palestinian society. The reaction of the left parties to this pressing reality has been rather rhetorical than substantial.

The dramatic retreat of Palestinian left parties from the social struggle arena cannot be understood in isolation from the overall crisis resulted from the global, regional and local transformations in the early 1990s. While many leftist movements and parties around the world managed to revive the centrality of leftist politics against neoliberal assault (e.g. the case of the Latin American left), the Palestinian left has not survived its long-standing and multilayered crisis. The causes and consequences of Palestinian left parties' crisis can be summarized as follows:

Strategic crisis: The collapse of the Soviet Union and the dramatic shift in the global balance of power in favor of the Western capitalist hegemony have had a devastating impact on the international left including the Palestinian left. In addition, the demise of revolutionary anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements worldwide has left Palestinian left parties with fragmented and weak allies.

Ideological crisis: Palestinian left parties have experienced serious ideological crisis after the downfall of the Soviet Union and the dismantling of the socialist model that existed at the time. The ideological retreat of revolutionary ideas and socialist alternatives had left a substantial gap that was filled by the dramatic rise of conservative trends and the expansion of Political Islam.

Crucially, the ideological crisis also meant the displacement of the Marxist body of thought, in particular, the decline of class analysis as a central tool in understanding social and economic dynamics and challenging the complicity of ruling classes in economic exploitation and marketing colonial and neocolonial ideas and subsequently diverting the national liberation trajectory. The highly problematic absence of class analysis in the Palestinian leftist circles was coincided with the interplay between

intensified Israeli colonization and the PA's neoliberal assault, thus exacerbating the levels of economic inequality and social repression without proper theoretical explanation and practical resistance.

Political crisis: The Oslo process and the establishment of the PA constituted a central challenge to Palestinian left parties. While Palestinian left parties differed in the rejection or acceptance of the Oslo accords, the result was further fragmentation of the left and increasing inability to produce viable theoretical and practical alternatives to the political and institutional reality introduced by the Oslo process.

The Palestinian internal schism, while disastrous on the cohesiveness of the Palestinian National Movement, the vacuum left by the Fatah-Hamas divide and the growing popular disappointment with the bipolar political division have provided a historic opportunity for the left parties to reemerge as an alternative force with progressive political and socioeconomic programs. However, the left failed to take advantage of the division and present itself as a unifying force. Instead, it found itself hostage to the political division.

NGOization: While initially left parties relied on their grassroots movement as a way to counter the PA/ Fatah hegemony, donors' intervention and conditionality have led to the restructuring of the left's organizational and institutional terrain, leading to a process of NGOization of the previously active grassroots organizations. NGOization meant that these organizations became elitist-oriented rather than grassroots based, implementing donors' agendas rather than locally formulated programs, transmitting neocolonial values rather than producing anti-colonial knowledge, and embracing apolitical character rather than politicalizing social struggle⁶. Eventually, leftists who engaged in the NGO sector found themselves in service of the Oslo framework with no effective agenda for radical social change. At best, these NGOs are dominated by liberal orientation that seek shallow reform in certain areas of governance rather than introducing a comprehensive vision for achieving social justice and overcoming inequality gaps.

Financial crisis: Part of the left parties' inability to act as an influential actor in the post-Oslo era can be attributed to their financial dependency on PLO allocations which are fully controlled by Fatah and the PA presidency. PLO allocations distributed to the PLO-affiliated left parties are often used to pressurize them and weaken their opposition to the PA. This has proved to be problematic for the left parties' political independence and therefore, hindered their ability to influence the PA economic policies and social programs. In addition, the absence of a wise financial policy, the decline of voluntary activities and donations and non-ownership of a mass media channel that would ensure sufficient financial return have all contributed to the deepening of the left parties' financial crisis⁷.

Social struggle continues

Despite the persistent crisis of Palestinian left parties and the incapability to organize effective social struggle initiatives, social struggle continues to be part of Palestinian daily life, though lacking organized action. Recent years have seen some popular protests and actions against PA's economic policies. In September 2012, protests erupted across the West Bank against Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's government policies that led to the soaring cost of living that eventually ended in the Prime Minister's resignation⁸. In February 2016, schoolteachers carried out unprecedented protests and strikes demanding dignity and an improvement of their socioeconomic conditions. This event is particularly interesting because the schoolteachers' action is organized without the backing of the teachers' union and was faced with a series of PA repressive techniques including arbitrary arrests, public threats, banning protests, defamation and cooptation, amongst others⁹. These events suggest that modes of social struggle have surpassed party organizations and unions' planning and that informal networking and spontaneous mobilization through social media and other platforms can overcome the state of fragmentation and yield relative successes. Nevertheless, in such pressing environment

where social injustices and economic inequalities are institutionalized, social struggle must be based on organized forms. It requires strategies, organization, mobilization, leadership, planning and techniques, and this can be only achieved through organized structures such as political parties and trade unions.

Given that social struggle lies at the core of leftist ideology in its various manifestations, the Palestinian left spectrum risks losing its distinct character if it does not embark on deep-seated ideological reorientation and reinvent itself as an emancipatory and resilient force that favors the marginalized and exploited. In fact, Palestine left parties cannot rise politically unless they regain the lost values of social struggle as a precondition for political liberation and self-determination.

Tariq Dana is a Senior Research Fellow at Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute of International Studies, Birzeit University, and a faculty member at the MA program in International Studies where he teaches courses on global political economy. He is also a policy advisor for the Palestinian Policy Network (Al-Shabaka).

NOTES

- Dana, Tariq (2015). The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society: Key Paradigm Shifts. *Middle East Critique*, 24(2), pp. 191-210.
- See: Hiltermann, Joost R. (1991). *Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
See also: Giacaman, Rita, & Johnson, Penny (1989). Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers: Palestinian Women in the Uprising. In: Lockman, Zachary, & Beinin, Joel (eds.), *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation* (pp. 115 – 171). Boston: South End Press.
- Jean-Klein, Iris (2003). Into Committees, out of the House? Familiar Forms in the Organization of Palestinian Committee Activism during the First Intifada. *American Ethnologist*, 30(4), pp. 556-577.
- Nakhleh, Khalil (2014). Oslo: Replacing Liberation with Economic Neo-Colonialism. Ramallah: Al-Shabaka. The Palestinian Policy Network. Retrieved from <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/oslo-replacing-liberation-with-economic-neo-colonialism/> [last accessed: 03/20/2016]. Hilal, Jamil (2015). Rethinking Palestine: settler-colonialism, neo-liberalism and individualism in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 8(3), pp. 351-362.
- Dana, Tariq (2014). The Palestinian capitalists that Have Gone Too Far. Ramallah: Al-Shabaka. The Palestinian Policy Network. Retrieved from <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/palestinian-capitalists-have-gone-too-far/> [last accessed: 03/20/2016].
See: Hammami, Rema (1995). NGOs: The professionalisation of politics. *Race & Class*, 37(2), pp. 51-63.
- See also: Dana, Tariq (2015). The Structural Transformation of Palestinian Civil Society: Key Paradigm Shifts. *Middle East Critique*, 24(2), pp. 191-210.
- Hilal, Jamil (2010). The Palestinian Left and the Multi-layered Challenges Ahead. Ramallah: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Regional Office Palestine. Retrieved from <http://www.palestine-studies.org/institute/fellows/palestinian-left-and-multi-layered-challenges-ahead> [last accessed: 03/20/2016].
- Palestinian PM 'willing to resign' after protests (2012, September 7). BBC News. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19515969> [last accessed: 03/20/2016].
- Deger, Allison (2016, March 2). *PA continues crackdown on West Bank teachers strike as anger with anti-democratic Palestinian leadership spreads*. Message posted to <http://mondoweiss.net/2016/03/pa-continues-crackdown-on-west-bank-teachers-strike-as-anger-with-anti-democratic-palestinian-leadership-spreads> [last accessed: 03/20/2016].

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is one of the major institutions of political education in the Federal Republic of Germany. RLS serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as a research center for progressive social development. It is closely affiliated to the German Left Party (DIE LINKE). The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine has supported partners in Palestine since 2000, and established the Regional Office in Ramallah in 2008. Today, the office is in charge of project cooperation with partners in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip as well as in Jordan.

PAL PAPERS is a collection of analyses and relevant viewpoints irregularly published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine. The content of PAL PAPERS is the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine.

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine
Responsible: Dr. Katja Hermann
Al-Wa'd Building, Muba'adeen Street, Al-Bireh / Ramallah, Palestine
Phone: + 972 (2) 240 38 30/2
Fax: + 972 (2) 240 39 80
Email: info@rosaluxemburg.ps
www.rosaluxemburg.ps
<https://www.facebook.com/rlfpal>