

Elections in Palestine: 'Democracy Under Occupation'

by Michele Steinberg

On Jan. 10, in Washington, D.C., Dianna Buttu, a legal advisor to the Palestine Liberation Organization's peace negotiators, gave a powerful, and grim picture of what really happened on the ground in the Jan. 9 elections that gave PLO Chairman Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) the Presidency of the Palestinian Authority by a broad victory of 62% of the vote. There were seven candidates for the Presidency, and humanitarian aid leader Mustafa Barghouti came in second, with just under 20%.

"To an outsider, it looks like a normal election," Buttu said. There were "200,000 posters, 500,000 stickers, millions of leaflets, and what-have-you . . . radio ads, TV ads, one even had Richard Gere," but it was anything *but* normal. Imagine Richard Gere going on TV to tell Palestinian youth to "Rock the Vote," at the same time that the highest number of Israeli military assaults and killings of Palestinians since the Nov. 11 death of Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat had been carried out in the single week before the election. Imagine the situation in East Jerusalem, where more than 95% of the registered Palestinians were *never allowed to vote!* The election was, as the title of Buttu's briefing to Washington, was called, "Democracy Under Occupation."

Buttu's report on the Palestinian elections, especially for Americans who worked and marched in the civil rights movement with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., before his assassination, and in his memory after his assassination, is a reminder that the battle for voting rights is both sacred and ongoing. And, as in America before the Voting Rights Act of 1965, voter suppression under Israeli interference in the elections, was "the law of the land." Her report was all the more poignant, coming four days after the Jan. 6 challenge to the acceptance of the Bush-Cheney electors from the State of Ohio, by members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate—Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-Ohio) and Sen. Bar-

bara Boxer (D-Calif.)—which led to a debate detailing the massive pattern of voter suppression in Ohio and other states, and putting into question whether Bush really "won" the 2004 election.

Sharon Deaf to Democracy

The Palestinian elections point to the sad fact that for the Bush Administration, the call for "democracy in the Middle East" is a hollow and cynical manipulation. Highly placed Washington intelligence sources reported that no less a figure than former President Jimmy Carter phoned Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon twice to protest the conditions the Israelis imposed on the election. But, President Carter was only able to secure a "promise" from Sharon's henchman, Dov Weisglass, to correct the "serious problems" of the voting procedure in East Jerusalem. No such corrections of the vote suppression occurred.

At the same time as reporting the grim picture, however, Buttu was able to communicate that an unprecedented optimism in the Palestinian population is shown by the polls: Some 81% of the Palestinians polled, accept a reconciliation with Israel. But, she warned, if the life of the Palestinians under the Israeli occupation does not change—meaning the end of checkpoints, of curfews, of Israeli assassinations of Palestinians, of Israeli land seizures to build more settlements and the apartheid wall, the end of constraints that prevent Palestinians from working and having normal jobs—then that optimism will disappear, and the situation will become "even more ugly" than ever.

This mood represents a tremendous opportunity *for Israel*, she emphasized, but the danger is that Israel will not take advantage of it, and will continue the collective punishment of the Palestinians.

Buttu made two immediate observations about the elec-

tion of Abu Mazen. First, he was elected only “President of the Palestinian Authority” and was *not*, like Yasser Arafat, the “leader of the Palestinian people.” The difference is simple and fundamental. In these elections, only 3.5 million Palestinians, out of 9 million, were eligible to register to vote. All refugees, including those as near as the refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, did not have the right to vote. The 1 million Palestinians who are citizens of Israel were not allowed to vote. And in the biggest outrage of all, only 5,767 Palestinians in East Jerusalem—out of 124,000 registered voters—were allowed to vote.

In East Jerusalem, Israel made every attempt to prevent voter registrations, but thanks to a door-to-door effort, 124,000 Palestinians were registered there. What happened is that in September 2004, the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (CEC) opened registration centers in Jerusalem. Then, on Sept. 13, the Israeli army shut down six of the registration centers in the city and arrested numerous employees of the CEC. Sensitive electoral materials and completed registration forms were also confiscated from the centers, effectively stifling the Palestinian democratic electoral process in Jerusalem. The registration centers were not allowed to reopen. A seventh registration center was closed by the CEC itself to avoid the military action.

Then, on Election Day, the Israelis restricted the voting to only post offices, which could handle—it was announced in advance—only 5,767 votes! That is, more than 95% of the Palestinians in East Jerusalem were *not allowed to vote—by design*. Some voters were channelled to other polling places, but they still had to go through checkpoints, and it is not known how many actually voted.

Buttu also presented a chart of the attacks on the Palestinians in the eight weeks since Nov. 11. And, in the final week before the election, she noted that the number of killings of Palestinians by Israelis was the highest since Arafat died, and the number of Palestinians arrested was the second highest. In these eight weeks, there were nine assassination attempts by the Israelis, in which eight Palestinians were killed. All told, 88 Palestinians were killed, one-quarter of them children. There were 339 injured by direct military assaults; 1,055 raids by Israeli security forces; 901 Palestinians arrested, with 276 detained. There were also 89 homes demolished, and 43 curfews imposed by the Israelis.

What Happens Next?

What happens next is very much up in the air. Sharon placed a telephone call to Abu Mazen after the election, and on Jan. 10, Bush said at a press conference that he had invited Abu Mazen to the White House. But, on Jan. 12, Israeli troops assassinated two Hamas militants in the West Bank. And, now, in Gaza—where the much ballyhooed Sharon “withdrawal” has not removed a single settlement, or soldier, the Israelis have sealed off the Gaza strip, and are mounting a counter-offensive—militants from the Islami Jihad and Ha-

mas have killed up to seven Israelis on military patrols and at military checkpoints since Jan. 9.

Hamas and Islami Jihad boycotted the Jan. 9 election, but Buttu reported that Hamas did extremely well in West Bank local Palestinian elections, winning 7 out of 26 races, and is biding its time to run in the legislative elections in June 2005. Part of their success is due to the fact that Sharon, with the U.S. blessing, dismantled and destroyed the Palestinian Authority. If Hamas’s gains are “alarming,” said Buttu, then the United States would do well to stop the Israelis from destroying the PA further, and start to rebuild that institution before it is too late.

Dire Situation

Sane voices in the United States, Europe, and the Arab world see the situation as as dire as Buttu describes.

“Abu Mazen has been elected the chief prisoner and his job will be to negotiate with the jailers the easing of conditions for the rest of the prisoners in the great national jail,” commented Edward Peck, a retired U.S. ambassador with extensive experience in Southwest Asia. Peck was speaking at a Jan. 12 press conference in Washington, D.C., with four other signators of an ad that appeared in *The Economist* magazine, arguing that the continued Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories is harming U.S. interests in the region. Peck was also among the international observers of the Jan. 9 Palestinian elections, along with President Carter.

Peck expressed amazement that the Palestinians, after 38 years of occupation, were sufficiently cohesive that they were able to pull together an election in such a short time. However, the conditions under which the election took place won’t advance anybody’s interests, he said. “When you go there, and you see what is happening, what has happened, and what will happen, it becomes immediately very clear that that region will not know peace or security under any circumstances until there’s a major opportunity for the Palestinians to have something resembling a state which has never been offered.” He said that Israel, under Sharon, perceives that its self-interest is “to take as much Palestinian territory as they can get with the minimum number of Palestinians.”

In addition, “Arab and European officials” have warned the U.S. that if there is no change in its strategy after the elections, then Abu Mazen “would resign and a deadly civil war would break out in the territories,” wrote Arnon Regular, in the Jan. 13 *Ha’aretz*. These officials say the United States must ensure that Israel negotiate with the Palestinians to end the occupation, and that Bush should appoint a special envoy, preferably his father’s former Secretary of State, James Baker III. For his part, on Jan. 12, Baker, who previously called for Israel to release political prisoner Marwan Barghouti, head of Fateh in the West Bank, said in a speech at Rice University, that Israel should stop “requiring that all terrorist activities cease in advance of any peace talks,” and should immediately return to negotiations.