

« The case for unity »

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The case for unity

A national unity government for Palestine is not only a moral necessity, it is a strategic inevitability, writes Mustafa Barghouti*

The question of a national unity government should not be treated merely in terms of the need to regulate relations between the various Palestinian factions. It should also be regarded in the broader contexts of the conduct of the struggle against occupation, Palestinian relations with the rest of the world, and the process of building alliances that will promote the success of the Palestinian cause.

There is unquestionably broad popular support for a national unity government. In addition to addressing the Palestinian factions issue, it is regarded as a mechanism for establishing the rule of law, safeguarding democracy, checking the breakdown in domestic security and warding off the spectre of civil war.

This tide of opinion reflects the growing awareness, sharpened by bitter experience, among both the general public and the factions that no political group can lead the Palestinian Authority (PA) on its own. It is not just that no political faction has won an absolute majority in Palestinian legislative elections. More importantly, if the battle for national liberation is to succeed, and the PA is to function with any autonomy under conditions of full occupation, the majority, if not all, political forces have to work in unison.

Support for a national unity government has also acquired strength from the people's instinctive repugnance of inter-factional and political party power struggles and the concomitant tendency to place factional or personal interests above the greater welfare. The popular temperament, in turn, encouraged proponents of national unity who were simultaneously dedicated to the national struggle to reach a meeting of minds, as a result of which the opportunity to create a national unity government is now within reach.

The first task of this government will be to dismantle the economic and political blockade against the Palestinian people. Israel had been working to politically isolate and economically strangle the Palestinians since 11 September five years ago. In tandem, Israel reinvaded PA territories in 2002, after which it has been making regular punitive raids and incursions, culminating in its siege of the elected Palestinian government and an unprecedented tightening of the economic blockade.

The central aim of the Israeli blockade is to defame the Palestinian liberation struggle, indeed, to dehumanise the Palestinian people so as to be able to claim that there is no negotiating partner. This

strategy, it believes, will give it opportunity to impose a unilateral solution comprising of territorial annexation, permanent occupation and apartheid rule.

It is no small measure of the power of the idea of a national unity government that it inspired the collective Palestinian drive that, after months of intensive activity, managed to place a wedge between the Russian/European and Israeli/US positions on the boycott. Certainly, if a national unity government could be created and this, in turn, brought into being a unified leadership and unified national strategy, we would be able to accomplish a range of crucial objectives.

Firstly, we could break the back of the economic boycott of the PA and begin to reverse the process of economic decay that has caused the Palestinian per capita income to plummet from \$1,600 to \$600 per year. The task, here, is twofold. Not only must we revive the influx of foreign aid and restore international commercial and financial interaction with the PA, we must also campaign to rally sufficient international pressure to compel Israel to release Palestinian tax revenues. The approximately \$500 million revenues that have accumulated so far represent 70 per cent of domestic income and would be sufficient to cover the back pay of all PA civil servants.

Secondly, a national unity government could regain the political/ diplomatic initiative from Israel. It could, for example, inaugurate a drive for an international peace conference that would take as its basis the Arab peace initiative adopted in Beirut and that would free all the occupied territories, recognise the rights of Palestinian refugees and put into effect the International Court of Justice ruling on the separation wall. There is no underestimating the impetus that could be gained by capitalising on the recent Israeli debacle in Lebanon for an Arab and international solidarity campaign against all interim, partial and unilateral solutions aimed at perpetuating and entrenching apartheid and for a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian cause.

Thirdly, it would be possible to inject new vitality into the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) by transforming it into a truly umbrella organisation for all Palestinian peoples and factions in Palestine and abroad, especially those who have been marginalised since the signing of the Oslo Accords. This in addition to restructuring the PLO so as to free it of its cumbersome bureaucracy and provide for the institution of proper democratic mechanisms will ensure that it is truly the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and the embodiment of their spirit of solidarity and unity of purpose.

Bureaucratic reform of the PA is also essential for improving the day-to-day lives of Palestinians and instilling the principle equal citizenship. A unified government will naturally stand a much better chance of overcoming the obstacles, most notably rampant personal or factional favouritism and nepotism, that stand in the way of remedying the various forms of administrative mismanagement that exist as well as improving efficiency.

Finally, the national unity government will best poised to conduct a truce and prisoner exchange with Israel in accordance to the strict observance of the principle of mutuality which includes Israel's commitment to halt all acts of aggression against Gaza and the West Bank, inclusive of Jerusalem. The release of Palestinian prisoners will be high on the agenda of the next Palestinian government and it is generally agreed that the successful release of all kidnapped ministers and legislative representatives will improve the prospects of a national unity government.

A national unity government is not a magic formula for solving all problems and we must be wary of succumbing to the illusion that the going will be easy. The stiff resistance that the very idea of a national unity government has encountered both locally and internationally is indicative of the difficulties that lay before us. It is only natural that those who are trying to obstruct the creation of a national unity government fear the risk to their interests and privileges from changing the status quo. But this is only further proof of how right the idea is and how more urgently it should be put into effect.

Bear in mind, too, that the only possible alternative to a national unity government under our current circumstances is further economic decline, the collapse of government and the dissipation of the energies that are so vital to our national struggle.

Conversely, consensus over such a government constitutes the first major step towards instituting a democratic Palestinian system and the rule of law as a way of life. Opting for a national unity government is both a moral and irreversible strategic choice as its major effects will be to solidify the Palestinian polity and strengthen the autonomy of Palestinian will and protect our decision-making processes from outside pressures, whether those intended to compel us to relinquish our rights and surrender or those seeking to exploit the Palestinian cause within the framework of other regional conflicts.

Clearly, there are many reasons why the Palestinian people have their hopes pinned on a national unity government. Everything possible must be done to keep narrow sectarian motives from disappointing them.

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