

Democratic choice punished

by Ibrahim Hewitt

The victory of Hamas in the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, Israel's subsequent decision to withhold tax payments and the refusal of donors to provide funds to the Palestinian Authority (PA) have grave implications for the welfare of individuals, for democracy and for Palestinian civil society.

Palestinian incomes have fallen by 40% over the last four years. The economy has been shattered by sieges, curfews, restrictions on movement of people and goods, and targeted destruction of infrastructure.



Intimidation by settlers and the Israeli army, the construction of the Wall and arbitrary taxes, fines and levies have bankrupted businesses. The 110,000 Palestinians (22% of the working population) who worked in Israel or in Israeli settlements before the second *intifada* have been replaced by migrant labour. Tourism has collapsed now that Bethlehem is hemmed in on all sides and cut off from Jerusalem.

Palestine has thus become the most foreign-aid dependent society on earth. With only a negligible local tax base, in 2005 the PA's budget of approximately \$1.9 billion came from three main sources: \$570 million provided by nations of the European Union, \$363 million by the US and approximately \$55m per month remitted by Israel from taxes and customs revenues collected from Palestinians by the occupation authorities. Eighty per cent of

households now depend on some form of humanitarian assistance. Over two thirds have an income of less than \$2 per person per day.

Employing 140,000 people, the PA is the largest single employer in Palestine. The PA employs 37% of those with employment in Gaza and 14% of the working population of the West Bank. The PA will not be able to pay their salaries and provide adequate public sector services, such as those provided by hospitals and schools, with an empty coffer. The UN fears that prolonged suspension of the salaries on which a million Palestinians depend will encourage criminality and lawlessness.

Throughout the occupation Christian and Muslim faith-based institutions have helped plug gaps. In the OPT a range of Islamic schools, orphanages, hospitals and clinics work with the PA. In Islamic schools children use PA textbooks and the PA curriculum (with additional classes on Islam). Islamic schools are licensed by the PA Ministry of Education. Without Islamic institutions for the blind, deaf and handicapped, these groups of children would receive no education at all. Many Islamic societies fund and support fatherless children or those abandoned by their fathers. Some of these are orphans of 'martyrs' – a term used to describe anyone killed by the Israelis whether involved in resistance or as a bystander – but they also fund orphans of collaborators, and children whose fathers die of disease or accidents. Support can include food parcels, school bags of books and funding for education or residential care in an orphanage. Most of these projects are funded

locally through Zakat Committees which are themselves licensed and audited by the PA Waqf Ministry.

"Although the Palestinian economy is soaking up huge levels of aid from the international community, that aid is simply mitigating the effects of the Israeli blockade. Not only is the international community effectively subsidising the costs of the occupation and relieving Israel, as the occupying power, of the need to provide for the Palestinians; the Israeli economy actually benefits from those donor funds because 45% of every dollar of aid for the Palestinians is spent in Israel. From 2000 to 2004, the aid doubled to almost \$1 billion a year, but because of the curfews and closures actual personal incomes in Palestine fell by 40%. The economy can recover only if external borders are opened, internal borders between Gaza and the West Bank are relaxed and Palestinian labour is allowed into Israel. However, Israel continues to control completely all the borders of Gaza, including that with Egypt and the sea and the air borders ... the current Israeli government is creating facts on the ground that will completely rule out a viable and contiguous Palestinian state ... a series of disconnected Bantustans, totally under the control of Israel and totally dependent on it...

Israeli strategy is leaving ordinary Palestinians with no hope for any improvement for their future and is undercutting moderates in the Palestinian community who want to find a negotiated solution. People such as President Abbas have almost nothing to show to Palestinians as an example of what has been delivered through the negotiation route. Instead, negotiation seems to have delivered a worse and worse lifestyle for Palestinians. ... the temptation is for more and more Palestinians to conclude that violence is the only answer."

Dr Phyllis Starkey MP, Hansard
26 Oct 2005 : Column 94WH



Dov Weisglass, an adviser to Ehud Olmert, the Israeli Prime Minister, reflected Israeli policy when he said: "The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger." Hunger pangs are supposed to encourage the Palestinians to force Hamas to change its attitude towards Israel or force Hamas out of government. Some Western countries are planning to completely bypass the PA, channelling aid through other channels such as UNRWA, the World Bank and NGOs. Both UK-based and Palestinian NGOs oppose these plans. NGOs have a vital role to play in augmenting state services but lack the capacity to undertake the colossal task of maintaining the civil service and providing public services. NGOs are not elected bodies. It is neither appropriate nor desirable for NGOs to step into the shoes of local authorities and take on massive responsibilities for which they are not equipped.

Interpal, like many other British NGOs, feels that the PA should have international support no matter which party is at the helm. It is important to raise public awareness of the plight of the Palestinian people and to counter the negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims induced

by the global war on terror. The democratic process dictates that any party elected fairly and judiciously by the majority of the people has the legitimacy to rule and must be accorded the courtesies and rights befitting an elected government. All the Western governments which used to work with the previous Palestinian administration should engage in dialogue with, and financially support, the current PA. Failure to do so would only penalise the Palestinians for participating in the democratic process – an extraordinary irony considering that the Palestinian election was encouraged by the West, produced an electoral turn-out rate considerably higher than in recent elections in the US and most of Europe and was unanimously endorsed by a massive team of international observers.

The international community must realise that foreign aid would not be necessary if it were not for Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands. PA ministers have pledged that they will not take their own salaries until PA employees are paid. This selflessness should remind Western governments that there was a strong element of altruism

motivating the 45% of the Palestinian electorate who voted for Hamas.

The humanitarian situation in Palestine is so dire that government-to-government aid alone will not be enough to ensure that the basic needs of the people are met. Civil society must also shoulder the responsibility of providing help to the needy. For Muslims this is not just a responsibility but an obligation. It is an inherent Islamic duty that Muslims must pay *zakat* (tax on income) and they are strongly encouraged to also give *sadaqah* (charitable giving). The politically-motivated impoverishment and dispossession of Palestinians should not just be a concern for Palestinians, the Arabs or Muslims but a crisis which must be addressed in the name of humanity by the international community – regardless of nationality, race or creed.

Ibrahim Hewitt is the chair of Interpal (www.interpal.org), the Palestinian Relief and Development Fund. Founded in 1994 and supporting locally-initiated programmes in the OPT, Jordan and Lebanon, Interpal is the largest British charity supplying humanitarian and development aid to Palestinians. Email: info@interpal.org