

January 9, 2005

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

Must Peace Wait for Democracy?

By LEON WIESELTIER

On June 24, 2002, President Bush propounded a new foundation for Palestinian statehood. "I call on the Palestinian people to elect new leaders, not compromised by terror," he said. "I call upon them to build a practicing democracy, based on tolerance and liberty. If the Palestinian people actively pursue these goals, America and the world will actively support their efforts." Neither Palestinian nationalism nor Palestinian suffering any longer justified the political enfranchisement of the Palestinians. Instead the Palestinian question was folded tidily into the Bush administration's catechism about democracy, which it has raised into the solution to all of the world's significant problems. Tyranny, terrorism, poverty, disease: the administration's answer to all these evils is elections. About the moral and political superiority of democracy, and about the disqualification of terrorists from politics and diplomacy, the president was correct; but there was something doctrinal, even magical, about his formula. "Market economics" in Gaza?

The idea that peace between Israelis and Palestinians must await the establishment of Palestinian democracy has been the work of idealists and cynics. The idealists believe, rightly, that the most lasting peace will very likely be a peace between democracies, and they believe, wrongly, that the cause of Palestinian misery, and therefore of Palestinian radicalism, has been the absence of open and pluralistic institutions. "The road to peace is paved with freedom," Natan Sharansky, the former Soviet dissident who now serves in the Israeli government, observes rather ahistorically in his new book "The Case for Democracy," an exercise in right-wing dogmatics. "The Palestinians lived under Israeli rule for a quarter century. But after less than a decade under Arafat's regime, their hatred toward Israel is higher than at any time in the past. Why? Because a fear society has descended on the Palestinians."

I am not sure that this apotheosis of anti-Israeli sentiment is confirmed by recent Palestinian polls, which suggest a growing exhaustion with terrorism and its consequences, but it is a little perverse to suggest that Palestinian opposition to Israel is based primarily on something other than Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands that Israel captured in a war of self-defense in 1967. (There is also Palestinian opposition to Israel's very existence, but all the democracy in the world will not mitigate it.) Yasir Arafat was hardly the only leader of a nationalist movement who ruled his downtrodden masses dictatorially. No, where Arafat most darkly distinguished himself in his field, where he most viciously betrayed his people, was in his refusal to rise from violence to statecraft. The view that his failure to make peace with Israel was owed to his failure to govern justly is refuted by Israel's experience with some of its neighboring regimes. The peace with autocratic Egypt is frigid, and Hosni Mubarak's use of anti-Semitism to divert the political energies of his population is disgusting, but the peace with Egypt is strong, and its chill is preferable

to the fire of war.

For the cynics, the insistence that Palestinian democracy must precede Palestinian statehood was just a method of impeding progress toward a compromise that would require Israeli concessions. Arafat performed a great service for the Israeli (and American) right: his perfidy was a way to end the discussion. But now Arafat is no more -- where there is death, there is hope, as Maurice Bowra used to say -- and the discussion must resume. If they are not disfigured by intimidation and fraud, like Arafat's farcical landslide in 1996, the Palestinian elections of today will confer a refreshing legitimacy upon a Palestinian leadership.

Yet there is no reason to think eschatologically about elections. This season of electoral excitement in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine must not simplify our understanding of political development. Elections are just one element in the epic of democracy. An independent judiciary, a free press, the existence of political parties: these may decide more. And what if the news is bad and the enemies of peace and freedom prosper in the elections? On Dec. 23, an alarming number of Hamas candidates prevailed in elections for Palestinian town councils. For many years now Palestinian society has been riven by a conflict between jihadists and modernists, and the election will more likely reflect this division than resolve it.

And then? The pace of Palestinian democratization will collide with the pace of Palestinian demographics. Democratization is a policy of destabilization, in which an entire political culture must be usurped, and so it demands time; yet one day between 2010 and 2015 there will be more Arabs than Jews between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Will the Palestinians become Madisonians in less than 5 years, less than 10 years? Israel cannot wait for the vision's appointed hour: it must preserve its equilibrium as a democratic state and a Jewish state whatever the political proclivities of the Palestinians. Ariel Sharon's apparent transformation -- it really was he who declared in 2003 that "the thought and idea that we can continue keeping under occupation (we might not like the word, but it is 'occupation') 3.5 million Palestinians is very bad for Israel, the Palestinians and Israel's economy" -- may be imputed not least to his recent discovery of the power of the numbers. He cannot secure his country merely with the conviction that men and women everywhere deserve to be free. Anyway, philosophy is the beginning of what we need to know about democracy, not the end.

And there are the duties of the interim: if it is true that genocides and famines do not occur where governments are accountable, it is also true that genocides must meanwhile be stopped and starving people must meanwhile be fed. After so much savagery, coexistence must be pursued even in the absence of perfect democracy. The beauty of democracy must not blind us to its difficulty, and to its rarity. The best peace is not the only peace; and peace, too, is beautiful.

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