

Denying Palestinians a Voice

Israel's elections rebuffed the hard-right politics of recent years, but the new government is still unlikely to stop Jewish settlers from seizing Palestinian land or to recognize equality for Arabs, many of whom have no say in the Israeli occupation that constrains their lives, reports Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

There has been extensive coverage in the U.S. press of the recent election in Israel, but almost no mention of the fact that some 4.3 million Palestinians, who live under Israeli Occupation, had no say in the process that will surely affect their futures.

In the American news media from the liberal MSNBC to the right-wing Fox it is just taken for granted that these people should have no meaningful voice. They are simply part of the scenery, dependent on whether Israel will let them have some quasi-state on scraps of land that Israeli settlers haven't taken.

Yet, outside the areas inhabited by the Palestinians on the same West Bank hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers were allowed to vote and, indeed, several major parties catered specifically to the settlers' desire to take more Palestinian land.

In other words, the people who have taken West Bank land in defiance of international law had the right to vote on what will happen to that territory, while those who are entitled to the land under international law remain effectively voiceless.

Yusef Munayyer, Executive Director of the Palestine Center, described this "massive" voter disenfranchisement of Palestinians, saying: "What you have today between the river and the sea, the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, are approximately ten million people. They are governed by the state of Israel.

"Only half of them are truly represented by that state as Jewish Israelis, the other half are either treated as second-class [Arab] citizens who are largely discriminated against in various ways, or have no right to vote for the system that governs them."

DB: Let's go through this carefully: maybe we can make the point this way, I think there are about 4.3 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza [including children]. How many of them voted in this election?

YM: Actually, none of them voted in this election. Palestinians living in the

West Bank and Gaza do not have Israeli citizenship, even though their lives are controlled by the Israeli state.

DB: So, let me go through this, in Ramallah and the West Bank there are 400,000 potential voters there. And how many voted?

YM: None.

DB: None. And in Nablus there's 150,000 potential voters, how many voted there?

YM: None, again.

DB: And, Al-Khalil [Hebron], about 250,000? How many ballots were cast there?

YM: Absolutely none.

DB: I could go down the line...

YM: Well, I should actually make a point of correction there. Ah, in Al-Khalil

DB: The settlers...

YM: ...exactly. The settlers had the privilege of voting because they are treated as Israeli citizens, of course they are Israeli citizens but their neighbors, Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian territory could not. So, you know, the few hundred Israeli settlers living amongst a mass of Palestinians, in a city like Hebron, have a greater say in determining the policies of the government that is impacting, directly, the lives of Palestinians throughout the West Bank and Gaza. Whereas the Palestinians themselves have no say in the system, at all.

DB: And I assume that given all the expansion of illegal settlements in Jerusalem and the West Bank, there's probably going to be a lot more voters, but they're all going to be Jewish from Israel.

YM: Well, it's an important thing to kind of keep track of, ... the demographics, across the board, showed that settlers and particularly the religious communities within Israel ... and there tends to be a lot of overlap in those categories. The birth rates there are the highest. It's a very fast growing community, and they continue to play an outsized role, in determining who gets to be in government and, in turn, what the make up of coalitions end up looking like. It's not surprising given this reality that really only the right wing in Israel is able to put together a coalition.

DB: Now, how many Palestinians are living inside what is considered Israel, now, inside the green line?

YM: Well, there are over 1.2 million Palestinians, who are inside Israel today. It should be noted that these Palestinians did not cross a border, the border crossed them. They are the original inhabitants of the territory that were there prior to 1948 that managed to survive the massive depopulation that took place from 1947 to 1949 to make way for the Jewish majoritarian State of Israel. Today they number about 1.2 million, or about 20 percent of Israel's population.

DB: Do we have any indication of how they voted? Were they strong in support of Netanyahu or ...?

YM: No, certainly not. There is a divide within the community of Palestinian citizens in Israel. Many of them feel that they should not take part in any way in a Israeli political system which is, you know, by nature geared against the very existence of Palestinians and Palestine, and has worked to disenfranchise them and dispossess them. Others believe that there is a strategy in being involved, and being active within the Israeli political system. For the most part though, especially in this election, there was a very minimal voter turnout among Arabs in Israel, in general, Palestinian citizens, in general.

But a few Arab parties did manage to win a few seats in the Israeli parliament. Not much different, though, in terms of their numbers than in previous elections.

DB: Just to stay with that for a moment, in terms of those few who were elected inside, as you say, inside the part of Palestine, where the border is now considered Israel, ... how are those elected representatives treated? Is there any indication that they have equal rights, or, in fact, that they have been discriminated against, probably in part, because they have some, little bit of power. How are they treated?

YM: We have to differentiate here between the representatives themselves, and the Palestinian citizens as well. Of course, the representatives are citizens, but there are different privileges that you have once you become a member of the Parliament.

And so, we are talking about two different things. In general, Palestinians citizens of Israel face a system of both legalistic and social discrimination, in the Israeli state. And a number of very fine civil rights and human rights organizations have thoroughly documented precisely how this system works.

But it's very simple to understand, that if you are living in a state, that by self-definition is a Jewish state, but you are not Jewish, that state is not going to welcome you. In the same way it is going to naturally ostracize you,

just by its nature. And so, stemming from this is a number of different policies and discriminatory features that target Palestinian citizens of Israel.

As for the members of the Israeli Knesset they too have faced an onslaught, particularly as Israeli politics has moved further to the right. And parties like Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party, ultra-nationalist party has come into, what is today, the mainstream. And has introduced a very, strong form of racism, what many would even call fascism into Israeli politics, when it comes to their policies towards Palestinian citizens of Israel. Members of the Knesset who are Palestinian citizens of Israel have been targeted. And there have been attempts to strip them of their immunity as members of Knesset, also prevent them from running in elections in the future.

DB: So you are saying that elected members of the Israeli parliament, despite the fact that they were elected, have been the butt of a great deal of abuse, discrimination, limitations, ... threats?

YM: Absolutely. For example, you look at the Palestinian citizen of Israel whose a member of the Knesset, Haneen Zoabi . She participated in the activists attempt at breaking the blockade of the Gaza Strip, which was known as the flotilla. And because of her participation, she's been branded as a traitor, and has been threatened, and there have been a number of attempts to punish her in different ways as a member of the Israeli Parliament. And this is but one example. Probably the most recent, and most egregious example, but a good example of how if Palestinian citizens of Israel and the Israeli Knesset refuse to toe the Zionist line that they are severely repressed for that.

DB: And, just to be clear, before we get back to the occupied parts of Palestine, that's sort of a strange phrase anyway, but just for arguments sake, those living inside the green line, Palestinians, some have compared their life there in the Jewish state as similar to life under U.S. Jim Crow law. Would that be an exaggeration?

YM: It's tough to make this kind of analogy. They are different, they are different situations. Now Jim Crow was something horrible, I think this is horrible, too. I don't know what you want to call it. It doesn't look anything like democracy should be, and it certainly looks a lot like apartheid.

DB: Alright, so I've heard the phrase "Comparison kills." So let's just focus on what kinds of rights are these Palestinians living in the so-called Jewish state, do they have the same rights to good housing, good schools; Israeli's schools are touted as being great, where does the breakdown come?

YM: For Palestinian citizens of Israel the discrimination is sometimes nuanced

but it's certainly there. One of the ways in which this becomes very apparent is how the budgeting is allocated for different areas based on ethnicity. For example even though the Palestinian citizens of Israel make up some 20 percent of the state's population, they receive less than half of that proportion of the budget for services. Just to give you an example of that sort of discrimination, they have the same voting rights as other Israeli citizens but they are not treated as full and equal members of society from a variety of other directions.

DB: Now, in terms of those disenfranchised in the precisely occupied parts of Palestine, now identified as such, how do they fair? And how do their rights hold up? Even if they don't have a chance to vote, I'm thinking maybe the Israelis want to give them some of the same rights. How does life in the West Bank stack up to life in Tel Aviv?

YM: Completely not comparable quality of life. Palestinians living in the West Bank are extremely limited in the choices that they are able to make in their lives. Where they are able to move is restricted by the Israeli occupation, where they are able to go to school is restricted by the Israeli occupation, whether or not they are able to reunite with their families in Gaza, let's say, or across the green line somewhere else, is restricted by the Israeli occupation. Who they are permitted to marry and reside with, is restricted by the Israeli occupation.

So a great many facets of their lives is determined by a state that doesn't represent them and they have no representation in. For Israelis living in Tel Aviv or say any of the other major cities in Israel or elsewhere, they have a normal degree of freedom that you would expect in most advanced states. Of course, that's because they are Jewish Israelis, not Palestinian citizens living elsewhere in Israel or in the occupied territories.

So what you have is a system that ultimately determines rights and laws that people have access to, based on ethnicity. And this is the type of regime that should not be welcome, I believe, in the twenty-first century.

DB: Just to make it clear for folks who perhaps don't get this yet, here I am, I'm a Jewish American if I went to Israel to live, I would have more rights than say the Palestinians living inside the green line, and certainly the people who have been living inside the West Bank and those territories for like ten or fifteen generations. I'd have more rights than them, right?

YM: You could move to a depopulated Palestinian village where the headstones of the ancestors of refugees still stand, and have more rights to that land than the ancestors of those buried there, who are just beyond the border, and unable to return, simply because you are of the Jewish faith and they are not.

DB: If I moved there, when would I be allowed to vote? Would I eventually have the right to vote?

YM: There's a naturalization process, but you can quickly go to Israel, the Israelis have a law that they call "the law of return" that enables a person who identifies as a Jew, and meets the criteria to be recognized as a Jewish person, as the state of Israel determines, can immigrate to Israel, become a resident and a citizen, in a very fast track way, and then vote in Israeli elections.

You know, the leader of one of the right-wing parties that performed very well in this past election, Naftali Bennett, is not from Israel. He lived in the United States, an American, moved to Israel, got involved in the Israeli political system and became now a politician leading a significant faction in Israeli politics. And so you have more rights as a Jewish person who lives in the United States to that land because of the Israeli state than a Palestinian does who may have been living on that land, and still owns property in that land, to this day.

DB: Now, if I were Palestinian living in the West Bank and my brother was living in the Gaza Strip and I wanted to go and spend a weekend with him, how difficult would that be?

YM: Very difficult, if not impossible.

DB: Right across there, we're talking about my brother living a few miles away, right?

YM: The Gaza Strip is not very far from the West Bank, we're talking perhaps 40 miles, separated by Israeli territory in between. Getting there though becomes extremely difficult. And getting back also becomes complicated, as well. The restrictions on movement are extremely significant.

First, you'd need a permit to leave, to move from place to place, of course this all depends on what the present situation is and it's highly variable. Checkpoints that did not exist yesterday can exist tomorrow. And so moving around, and depending on how you move around whether it's by vehicle, or on foot, or by taxi requires certain permits. Crossing borders requires certain permits. Coming back requires certain permits all of which is something that needs to be applied for and approved by an Israeli military apparatus that is more often than not, not helpful to Palestinians who want to do the basic things that everyone else takes for granted like being able to go visit their brother or their family a few miles away.

And so, no, it's not an easy thing to do. I don't want to say it's completely impossible because it can happen but the extent of effort that one has to go

through, including roundabout journeys to not go through Israeli territory, make the journey practically impossible.

DB: Now back to election results, if every Palestinian, just say every Palestinian living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had a right to vote, what would sort of be the breakdown in terms of Jewish voters and Palestinian voters?

YM: Well, it would probably be around fifty-fifty. And, you know, it's really interesting to think about because it allows you to think about coalition formation and party ideology in a completely different way. Remember, you have some divisions within the Palestinian community that are similar to divisions that you see in the Israeli community as well as everywhere else.

DB: Conservatives, liberals...radicals...

YM: ...liberals, seculars ... religious, that sort of thing. And so it's not inconceivable that if you had an election system that allowed for participation of all people within the state that you might see a party, coalitions forming between religious parties across ethnic and religious lines that have similar interests in terms of whether or not pork should be legally traded in the market, or the role of women in society, and so on and so forth. Versus secular parties who have different perspectives about these issues and the role of religion and the state, and so on.

DB: So, for instance, you might have conservative Palestinians agreeing with conservative Jews on what role women should play within the culture and the society.

YM: You have parties in Israel today that, for example, on the role of women are extremely conservative, and have a very fundamentalist perspective on the role of women, and that has been a flashpoint in Israeli politics. And so it's not inconceivable that those alliances can be formed if there was an election in the system that allowed everybody to vote. Once that barrier, that artificial barrier that's there in the political system disappears a whole bunch of different coalitions and parties become imaginable. Because the issues that divide them become different, and there are agreements that become possible across ethnic and religious lines, that just were not possible before. So it would really amount to, I think, a radical reformation of the political constellation in the system altogether.

DB: And, finally, in this context what kinds of actions has the Israeli apartheid state taken to make sure that people don't understand this population differential, and what it might mean in an election. What are the rules in terms of what actions, is this a part of the Israeli state's behavior to make sure

that this disenfranchisement, this connection between Palestinians and Jews, this balance is not a part of the dialogue, if you will, and that in fact there are more Jews coming in, less Palestinians?

YM: The Israeli government over time has been constantly obsessed with demographics. Because, you have to remember, this is a state that was established by a political movement, the Zionist political movement, which was a minority in the territory. That had the objective of coming into a territory that was populated by a majority of native inhabitants and then establishing a majoritarian state, in that space.

So from the very beginning demographics and demographic engineering were central in the Zionist political movement and continue to be. There's a perpetual fear in Zionist politics about becoming outnumbered. You can imagine, in the United States for example, or other democratic systems, as we are seeing today, minorities playing a larger role in politics, and making the election of a white candidate less likely without posing an existential threat to the entire political system. In Israel that's not the case. That obsession over demographics has been there from the beginning and will continue to be, because the state cannot imagine its own existence without a significant Jewish majority.

And so, yes, the immigration of Jews into Israel has been something that has been heavily supported by the state. And opportunities to reduce the Palestinian population within the state have also been taken. That demographic battle is something that various Israeli governments have engaged in, and probably will continue to engage in, as well.

DB: Now, I know you are somebody who monitors the U.S. press in the context of this issue. What kind of coverage has there been of this disenfranchisement? There was a lot of concern on the part of the Democrats. I mentioned all the MSNBCers, the Rachel Maddows, the Big Eds, and the Christopher Matthews ... talking about the disenfranchisement of black and brown and poor people in the U.S. What kind of concern is coming out of the liberal media relating to this issue in Israel/Palestine? Anything?

YM: You don't see much attention to this particular issue at all because the solution to this issue has not been considered one of civil rights and civil liberties, as was the case in South Africa, as was the case here in the United States over the course of multi-decade, multi-century struggle for equality here. Rather the solution is interpreted to be one of separatism. The idea that the Palestinians will have their own state.

In reality that solution has only been a solution to the Zionist problem. The

problem that the Zionists face is that they want the Palestinian geography without Palestinian demography. And so they find themselves in a position now where they occupy the West Bank, and they do not want to let go of the territory, but at the same time they do not want to give the Palestinians there the right to vote, and the right to citizenship, and so on.

And so separatism is seen as a solution to that Zionist problem but it's no solution to the Palestinian's problem that include rights to return to their homes, as well as self-determination, and the right to vote, the right to equality and dignity in their homeland, and so on. And so, that issue of separatism has acted really as a fig leaf to distract from an apartheid reality that is only becoming further, and further entrenched.

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