

ISRAEL AGAINST DEMOCRACY

*Hilla Dayan**

Israel is currently undergoing a quiet anti-democratic revolution spurred by a self-proclaimed 'second Zionist revolution'. It began with serial admonitions directed against academics, civil society associations and foundations, veteran human rights NGOs, individual anti-occupation activists and the Palestinian citizen minority at large. 'Scientific findings' have been presented to Parliamentary committees supposedly exposing the subversive activities of 'the enemies from within'. There were explicit threats, such as the ultimatum given to the president of Ben Gurion University to dispose of anti-Zionist faculty within 30 days or else University donors would be approached and asked to withdraw their donations. This insidious threat first backfired, provoking protest in the name of academic freedom. But the demand succeeded eventually in severely undermining academic freedom. Ben Gurion University recently adopted new bylaws, which threaten academics with disciplinary measures for opposing government policies by supporting academic boycotts. The irony of course, is that this 'revolution' is not waged in the name of the people but on behalf of the state, and against democracy.

Benjamin Netanyahu's government has lifted the settlers' movement to a historical peak of power. Split into small ultra-nationalist parties in fierce competition for visibility, the movement nevertheless occupies a position of hegemony. It today claims to represent not a minority, a rather marginal sub-sector of Israeli society, but 'the Jewish people', on whose behalf the current Israeli Parliament, the 18th Knesset, unleashed a tsunami of anti-democratic legislation. Literally hundreds of new proposed bills seek to restrict the freedom of expression and association of individuals and organizations, and severely penalize Israeli citizens for a variety of legitimate and non-violent political activities. In March 2010, the Knesset enacted the Nakba Law, allowing the State to revoke government funding for groups and public institutions commemorating the 1948 Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe). In July, the anti-boycott bill passed into law. This law levies punitive fines without a need for proof of damage on citizens who are alleged to call for academic, cultural or economic boycotts. It could lead to revoking the non-profit status of, and thus effectively ban, organizations such as the Coalition of Women for Peace, whose research into the economy of the occupation (whoprofits.org) has played a pivotal role in successful international campaigns promoting government and corporate social responsibility. Theatres may censure artists and actors who refuse to perform in theatres illegally built on Palestinian land for fear of losing government funding. The bill's stated purpose is to protect Israel's illegal

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settlements in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. It turns Israeli citizens by default into active supporters of violations of international law. It enables settlers and right-wing organizations to harass political opponents and companies and drag them to court day in day out on false 'boycott' charges.

A marked escalation of repression, the turning point being the 2008-2009 military offensive in Gaza, translated public admonitions of dissent into full-scale anti-democratic legal revision. This legal revision is dealing a blow, the strongest to date, perhaps the most lethal, to the country's shaky democratic foundations and liberal image. It is as anti-intellectual, racist, fanatic, and intolerant of dissent as the 'lords of the land' ideology of the settlers. With the help of its long civilian arm, the extreme right in power is clearly demonstrating that it is willing and able to go to great length in undermining democracy and wreaking havoc on Israeli civil society and the Palestinian minority in order to sustain the occupation and the settlements at all costs. What distinguishes this new populist movement from the populism we are familiar with in Europe is that it does not raise the spectre of a Zionist revolution in opposition to the status quo, but in an attempt to violently enforce it. The Israeli settlers' movement and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands nonetheless share not only dubious funding sources and a vulgar vision of the conflict that manipulatively seeks to advance parochial interests by globalizing islamophobia; they also share a desire to dominate the political discourse entirely. Wilders' extremist Israeli friends seem to be in a better position, since they are currently in power, to enforce by law intolerance of opposition and persecution of ideological enemies.

We can certainly attribute the legal revision enacted by this movement against democracy to the growing visibility and international success of the non-violent resistance to the occupation in Israel/Palestine and internationally. Israeli leaders officially acknowledge, by initiating the boycott prohibition bill, for instance, that the international boycott, divestment and sanctions movement (BDS) is actually effective. Indeed, Israel's international status is plummeting. According to a recent BBC poll surveying 27 countries, Israel is grouped with Iran and North Korea as 'the world's least popular countries' and viewed as having a negative influence in the world. Just when it seems that the international community is approaching the point of finally having enough of Israel's entrenched policies of occupation and settlement, Israel is turning its back both to the forces of democratization in the Middle East, and to the West, trumping international sensibilities as to basic standards of democracy.

Israel's international isolation is clearly a result of misguided actions of a reckless government lashing out at its citizens for allegedly causing the 'delegitimation of Israel' rather than seriously dealing with the new realities taking shape in the region. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu considered boycotting the Mideast Quartet meeting for fear of international pressure. His Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, blatantly lied about his 'successful meetings' in Europe, forcing heads of state to respond by underlining major disagreements. The notion that Israel could protect itself from

'delegitimisation' through domestic repression of dissent is preposterous. Crushing dissent will not turn the tide. International pressure and solidarity with the non-violent resistance to the occupation will continue to soar. Even when it backlashes, even when it sometimes unintentionally puts at risk those activists struggling on the ground to end the occupation, international pressure is both necessary and productive in the short and the long run. Policy makers and international stakeholders confronted persuasively and effectively with the resolve of Palestinian, Israeli and international civil society to demand justice, accountability and an end to a brutal occupation by Israel must act to defend individuals and organizations from government retribution and punish this government for its anti-democratic excesses. Ensuring that Israel pays a heavy international price for domestic repression is not only a matter of a moral and legal obligation of the international community, but possibly the only way to bring the country to its senses. No matter how far-reaching new repressive laws are, dissenters and human rights defenders in Israel will not stop their struggle for democracy and justice at the government's command. These democratic forces will not be silenced, not even by a state whose desperate actions signal to the world that it is currently indifferent to its prospects of becoming the only dictatorship in the Middle East.