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Why Yasser Arafat must go

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While Israeli tanks were rolling into the West Bank town of Jenin in April, an event of profound significance for Palestinians was taking place on the other side of the world. The fact that it passed unnoticed by most Arabs (and their global allies for Palestinian rights) says much about the current paralysis immobilizing the Palestinian solidarity movement. I refer to the presidential election in East Timor that was followed a month later by the formal declaration of East Timor's independence.

Those events marked the culmination of a 25-year struggle for national liberation and self-determination and are a celebratory chapter in the long and painful struggle for human emancipation. The lessons to be learned from this struggle are many. The question is, are the Palestinians and their supporters willing to heed them?

While there are significant differences between the cases of East Timor and Palestine, the parallels that do exist merit serious reflection. The West Bank and East Timor were occupied at roughly the same time, 1967 and 1975 respectively. As with Israel, Indonesia received blanket support from the United States. To cite just one example, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Daniel Moynihan, recounted in his memoirs that Washington blocked international action against Indonesia's invasion of East Timor. "The Department of State," he wrote, "desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success." Similarly, the U.S. routinely vetoed UN resolutions critical of Israel.

Critics of the East Timor/Palestine analogy will point out that Israel is a more formidable adversary than Indonesia ever was. This is true. The role that Israel plays in America's strategic conception of the world cannot be equated with Indonesia's. Yet, it is important to recall that East Timor, unlike the West Bank and Gaza Strip, suffered a near genocide that wiped out nearly one-third of its population. The brutality of Israel's occupation notwithstanding, Palestinian losses have never been as great.

Furthermore, the Palestine Liberation Organization had considerable financial resources to draw on. Since 1967, millions of dollars poured into Palestinian bank accounts from the Arab/Muslim world. In comparison, the East Timorese resistance was broke. All things considered, the Palestinians possessed far better prospects for victory. The critical question is, why did East Timor celebrate its independence while the Palestinians

suffered another year under occupation? The role of leadership (or lack thereof in the Palestinian case) is the key variable that explains much of the difference.

For much of the 1990s, I was a Palestinian solidarity activist in Ottawa, working for a two-state solution. Ottawa was also the home of an East Timorese solidarity movement (East Timor Action Network) whose organizational skills and moral commitment were outstanding.

When ETAN held a demonstration, their posters could be seen throughout the city. Their regular protests in front of the Indonesian embassy and public lectures would generate local and sometimes national media coverage. MPs would regularly stand in the House of Commons to ask about Canadian policy toward Indonesia and its consequences for East Timor. ETAN's appeal was based on universal principles of justice and human rights, and its message resonated with most Canadians. Such behaviour was reproduced throughout North America and Europe, and critically -- unlike with the Palestinians -- it was coordinated and supported by the leadership of the East Timorese resistance.

When considering the hopeless situation in Palestine today, I am reminded of a conversation between Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said and African National Congress leader Walter Sisulu. In 1991, during his visit to ANC headquarters, Mr. Said asked Mr. Sisulu how the ANC turned defeat into victory.

"We organized in every major Western city; we initiated committees, we prodded the media, we held meetings and demonstrations, not once or twice but thousands of times. We organized university campuses, and churches, and labour unions, and business people, and professional groups. Every victory that we registered in London, Glasgow, or Iowa City, or Toulouse, or Berlin, or Stockholm gave the people at home a sense of hope, and renewed their determination not to give up the struggle. In time we morally isolated the South African regime and its policy of apartheid so that even though militarily we could not do much to hurt them, in the end they came to us, asking for negotiations."

The lessons for the Palestinians are evident. The South Africans and the East Timorese relied on a credible leadership with a moral vision and serious commitment to democracy and human rights. The corrupt and autocratic Palestinian leadership, by contrast, did not rise to this standard. Rather than investing resources in mobilizing international public opinion in support of Palestinian rights, the leadership chose the politics of nepotism and patrimonialism. By throwing itself so completely into the hands of the Clinton and Bush administrations, it has brought one disaster after another on the Palestinians.

The main reason that Yasser Arafat should go is because, unlike Jose Alexandre (Xanana) Gusmao in East Timor or Nelson Mandela in South Africa, he has failed to lead his people toward democracy and independence.

A primary lesson to be learned from East Timor and South Africa is that the struggle for self-determination has to be waged in opposition to U.S. foreign policy, not in deference to it. It was partly because of domestic pressure that Washington gave in to the popular

struggles in East Timor and South Africa. The sooner Palestinians focus on the lesson from East Timor, the sooner the road to emancipation will emerge.

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