

Democratic Confederalism and the Palestinian Experience

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While in most Arab countries the left is in a prolonged retreat, we see how the Kurdish left succeeded to establish itself as the dominant force between the Kurdish masses in most of Kurdistan, even as it is divided between different nation-states. This makes the study of the Kurdish experience and of the revolutionary theory that inspires it an essential effort for Palestinian and Arab activists looking for new agenda for liberation from Imperialism, Zionism and local tyrannies.

Practical and Theoretical base for Democratic Confederalism

Abdullah Ocalan, in his book “Democratic Confederalism”, proposes this bottom-up organization of society based strongly on the Kurdish experience, but also on a wide and deep view of history. He mentions how old Feudal empires strived by allowing a wide range of diverse cultural societies to co-exist and relying on the organization of

many aspects of society on the local level.

Out of the specific local conditions that helped the Kurdish society in North Kurdistan to adopt the model of local self-organization through local councils, as mentioned by Ocalan and other writers, we may remember the old social bonds in a mostly-rural population living in harsh conditions, inherent distrust of the ruling state institutes due to its oppressive attempt to mechanically enforce its nation-state concept and, of course, the leading role of the liberation movement in organizing the masses.

The concept of Bottom-Up democracy was adopted in different forms in many revolutionary movements. We may start with the Workers Councils – famous by their Russian name Soviets – that were born in Russia in the 1905 revolution and were developed by the Bolsheviks as the organizing principle of their system of government. These councils lost their real popular base after the first revolutionary period. One of the more known present-day experiences of building democracy from its popular base is the “Participative Democracy” that Chavez tried to promote in Venezuela.

While it is not in the scope of this paper to compare the different paradigms of popular democracy, it is important to note that Ocalan, with the proposition of Democratic Confederalism, is suggesting a framework where people’s power may be separated from the state’s power. He even examines an option for the long-term coexistence of this “dual rule”.

The concept of Democratic Confederalism is based on the organization of society on the local level to take care for its real needs. It stresses the central role of women liberation in the emancipation of society as a whole and the ecological approach for sustainable economic development. From the local assemblies, it forms higher level assemblies for coordination for common goals, while the centre of power stays in the lower level.

This is, to some extent, an adaptation of the concept of popular democracy to the special conditions of the Kurdish people. As any suggestion of forming a separate Kurdish state is encountered with utmost rejection and repression, the balance of power on the ground is changing in favor of the local society. This paradigm allows also for uniting the Kurdish people through the organs of Democratic Confederalism without directly challenging the “holy” state borders in the war-prone Middle East.

Similarities and differences of the situation in

Palestine

The basics of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts are very different from those of the Kurd's struggle against their different oppressors. While the Kurds were subject to severe repressive measures, some of them, like the ban of the native language, were not matched by Zionism; Ocalan reminds us that there is a long history of good relations between the Kurdish communities and their various neighbours. Only the creation of the nation-states after the First World War created the basis for the current oppression of the Kurds.

In contrast, Zionism was implanted in Palestine as an external and hostile force, part of the European colonization of subjected countries all over the world. Today, after the direct colonialist rule was overthrown all over the world by liberation movements, Israel is the only case of active colonialism still in its expansionist stage: Usurping land from the native population, denying them any civil or national rights, engaging in systematic Ethnic Cleansing both in the 1948 and the 1967 occupied areas. This makes for another basically different characteristic of the conflict: While Ocalan speaks of a nation-state trying to forcefully assimilate local communities, the utmost goal of Zionism remains to drive Palestinians out of their homeland.

The imminent threat of total annihilation of their society forced Palestinians to mobilize on a very high level. From the beginning of the Zionist colonization more than a hundred years ago, Palestinians engage both in mass struggle and in armed resistance. One of the highest points in this struggle was between the years 1936 and 1939, when a general strike of the Palestinian population, against the British occupation and Zionist colonization, continued for a full half-year, paralyzing many sectors of the economy. It was followed by three years of armed insurrection, when most of the rural areas were under control of the guerilla. This period of struggle exposed the different agendas between the popular movement that tried to organize the masses and care for their daily needs and the traditional leadership that tried to limit the struggle and tended to compromise with the British occupation.

The next massive explosion of revolutionary struggle by the Palestinians came after the 1967 defeat of the Arab armies by Israeli aggression. The Palestinians, most of them refugees after the 1948 Nakba, understood that Palestine will not be freed by state warfare and mobilized for revolutionary popular war, based mostly on the dwellers of the refugee camps. This revolutionary war put the Palestinians in conflict with the interests of the local Arab regimes. As a result, the Palestinian guerilla was crushed by the Jordanian army in the Black September of 1970, oppressed again in Lebanon in 1976 by local fascists with the help of the Syrian army, and forced to leave Lebanon by the invading Israeli army in 1982.

Later the centre of the struggle moved again inside Palestine, with the first (1987-1993) and the second (2000-2005) Intifadas.

In all this period the concentration of all efforts was on the main conflict, initially against the British occupation and the Zionist colonization and later all against Israel as the realization of the colonialist movement. The question of self-organization of the native population was viewed as secondary. This concentration on the struggle over state-power was driven by the constant belief that another military effort could bring about liberation, and that the internal need of the local society would then be handled by the emerging patriotic government.

In the long term, as military victory proved elusive, the weakness of self-organization of the local society is hindering its ability to stand in the face of constant pressure and erosion by the occupying force. On the other hand, even when Palestinians try to concentrate on organizing the local society, this is extremely hard to achieve under the conditions of military occupation, when their economy is both subjected and marginalized by the hegemonic Israeli capitalist economy and any political or trade unionist organization can be suppressed.

With a view to the future, democratic cross-border mass organization, as suggested by Ocalan for uniting the Kurdish people, may also be the best way to revitalize the Palestinian liberation movement, whose old institutions were converted to state-like structures without real sovereignty.

Speaking about the longer future of Palestine after the defeat of Zionism and the return of Palestinian refugees, we stand for a single democratic state in all of Palestine. We reject the notion of “bi-national state” that will entrench a dual-rule system that may perpetuate the relics of Zionism. Yet some form of communal democracy can be a practical way to accommodate for the ethnic and cultural diversity of the population.

Some Palestinian experiences with popular democracy

From the time of the 1936-39 strike and insurrection, Palestinians practised self-organization and self-rule in the midst of an open conflict with murderous enemies. There were new experiences of organization and popular democracy in the refugee camps at the height of Palestinian armed revolution in Jordan and Lebanon. Palestinian in the refugee camps in Lebanon still enjoy some level of self-rule in spite of all the blows that they suffered there.

The first Intifada was basically organized by grass-roots local organizations, and a

great part of its agenda was to challenge all aspects of the daily rule of the occupation over people's lives. For some time the occupation simply closed all schools and the popular committees of the intifada organized "popular study" programs.

I want to examine in more details the local experience in the 1948 occupied territories, which is less recognized internationally, where I have personal experience through participation in the struggle over the last 40 years.

Arab Palestinians in the 48 territories were what remained of an annihilated society after the 1948 Nakba, when all cities in the occupied areas and more than 500 villages were ethnically cleansed and destroyed. They counted less than 200,000 after the Nakba but by now count almost one and a half million.

In 1976, after a whole new generation emerged, they organized for the first time to confront a governmental plan of mass land confiscation. In many villages, people organized local "land defence" committees. On March 30, 1976, "The Land Day", there was the first general strike since the Nakba. The police and the army attacked the villages and six of the local people were killed. Still "The Land Day" is remembered with pride in the history of the Palestinian people and is celebrated as a national day every year.

Since then the concept of "Popular Committees" as the main organ of mass struggle has become part of the local tradition in many Arab villages and neighbourhoods. Typically the "popular committee" is composed of the representative of all the political parties as well as of other local bodies and volunteers.

Another local tradition is the "protest tent" that is set up when the struggle in some locality requires constant mobilization. In many cases protest tents are opened on land that is in danger of confiscation or near houses that the authorities plan to destroy. Sometimes the protest tent is becoming the centre of political and cultural lives for the population of the specific locality.

There were two experiences of the local organization of a different kind oriented to the immediate needs of the population. In the fifties and the sixties of the previous century, just after the Nakba, the communist party was the only remaining active mass organization within the Palestinian Arab population in the 48 occupied territories. It had an important role in the restructuring of society after the trauma of the Nakba on a political and cultural level. It also experimented with other shapes of organizations, like organizing collective shops and some productive collectives. In the last two decades "The Islamic Movement" is the most popular political party. One of its slogans is the "self-sustained society", and it builds a network of charities and local

services wherever it has a strong influence. Yet both experiences are mostly partisan and didn't try to organize the population in a democratic framework open for all.

In our local experience, the popular democratic organization is conceived and functioning as a tool in the struggle and rarely is used as an organ of self-government. There are many reasons for that, basically the destruction of the old rural economy, marginalization of the local Palestinian economy in the Israeli capitalist economy and local class contradictions. But there is also lack of serious thinking and experimentation with a local organization that could build a stronger local society with more internal solidarity.

Democratic Confederalism and the Arab Spring

When Ocalan first proposed the concept of Democratic Confederalism it was in the context of strong nation-states. The new concept concentrated on defending and strengthening local societies. It allowed for a local organization without necessarily challenging the state's structure.

But, at the same time, Ocalan also analyzed the weaknesses of the whole regional political structure and its inadequacy to the needs of all local nations and communities. His wider vision was of democratic re-orientation for the region as a whole.

The failure of all local state structures could not be demonstrated in a more dramatic and tragic way than the latest developments in the Arab countries, in what started as "The Arab Spring" but is now characterized by a wave of counter-revolutionary oppression.

Since 2011, faced with a wave of mass struggle and the demands for democratic change, the local elites, entrenched at the centre of state apparatuses, responded with a combination of state repression and incitement of sectarian and ethnic "Fitna" (a special Arabic word for dangerous civil strife). The erosion of the foundation of the society by these conflicts also created the conditions for the rise of religious extremism and groups that try to take control by terrorizing the population.

With its long tradition of self-organization and self-defence, it is no wonder that the Kurdish population was relatively better placed to confront these harsh new realities. This has much to do with the theory and practice of Democratic Confederalism.

Facing the conversion of the state apparatus into a naked oppressive machine, many sections of the population in the affected Arab countries now engage in heroic experiments of self-organization, self-rule and self-defence. In Libya and Yemen, different local militias now hold more power than the state armies. Syria and Iraq are

torn apart by civil war. In Egypt, the all-powerful state apparatus wages an all-out war against local society, symbolized by imposing the death sentence on hundreds of demonstrations in a single trial and by the most inhuman siege of the Palestinian Gaza strip.

The solution should come in the form of new democratic re-organization of society, in the shape of Democratic Confederalism or any similar framework. It should build on the courage and the ability to organize that the masses proved and developed through the years of strife. From necessity, it should form a virtue. From confronting the cruelty of the regimes and extremism, it should form the new norms for solidarity and mutual respect between all components of the society, embracing all different cultures, religions and ethnicities.

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