

Columnists

Behind The Headlines

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Palestine comes of age



By Bunn Nagara

However hard Israel may try to block equal rights for Palestine in peace talks, even its US ally cannot stop an international quest for justice.

WHEN news broke earlier in the week that French parliamentarians had voted in favour of recognising Palestine, more issues were left unsaid than had been reported.

Several questions typically remain unasked by Western news media. The answers are likely to be even more elusive.

Among them is why did it take so long for the French Parliament to even decide to vote on the issue?

After many long years of Palestinians' pain and death, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was granted "observer entity" status at the UN in 1974. But this did little for the Palestinian quest for statehood or security.

Then on Nov 29, 2012, President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority (PA) submitted a bid to the UN General Assembly, the only notable democratic UN body, for an upgrade in status.

The General Assembly (GA) voted in favour by a landslide of 138 votes to nine, with 41 abstentions, to lift Palestine's status from "observer entity" to "non-Member Observer State."

That moment coincided with the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People and the GA's annual debate on the Question of Palestine. It was a limited victory for the Palestinians, given the restricted terms of the new status, but for them every bit counted.

Israel, backed by the US, continually tried to block the process. At the same time Israel actively maintained a policy of brutal occupation of Palestinian territories with unending waves of "settlements" on Palestinian land.

For years, Israel not only fought the PLO's secular Fatah faction but encouraged Islamist elements with leaders like the late Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in the Palestinian resistance. It was Israel's divide-and-rule strategy to weaken the Palestinians.

That worked at several levels: political, diplomatic and military. But it also had its limits for Israel, because it was leading to the development of the more militant Hamas which Sheikh Ahmed Yassin later founded.

For much of the time, though, Israel clearly had the upper hand in the use of force against Palestine and all that a viable two-state solution represented: Palestine's security, dignity and credibility as a state.

Israel's suppression of Palestinian self-determination was conducted with customary impunity, regardless of its party or leader at the time.

The US would sometimes show disappointment or frustration as peace efforts stalled or were even reversed, but it did nothing to upset Israel or force it to the negotiating table.

Meanwhile, the 2012 status upgrade for Palestine seemed to be a difference of only half a notch, and just a symbolic one at that. But it was a beginning, the start of a process that would slowly build momentum.

The PA's move at the UN was itself a result of deep-seated Palestinian frustration over constant Israeli stubbornness in arriving at any meaningful negotiations. By implication, it was also a signal that inadequate and flawed US efforts at brokering talks had failed miserably.

When Israel and the US condemned Palestinian resistance fighters for taking up arms, leaders like Abbas stepped up the diplomatic offensive. But even this peaceful approach was rejected by Tel Aviv and Washington.

Much of the rest of the world, however, was not blind to the reality on the ground. The Palestinians' increasingly harrowing plight had not gone unnoticed.

The word "state" in Palestine's non-Member Observer State status since 2012 provided the leverage for taking the Palestinian cause further. The fulcrum was Israel's own aggressive actions, both militarily through occupation and blockade as well as economically in expanding its illegal settlements and denying Palestinians substantial means of livelihood.

In October this year, Sweden formally recognised Palestine, saying it hoped that would pave the way for other European countries to do so.

It became the first "major" EU country to recognise Palestine, after Hungary, Poland and Slovakia had done so – before they joined the EU.

European countries had repeatedly warned Israel that it was losing its credit with them by continuing its illegal settlements while avoiding serious negotiations with Palestinian leaders.

Sweden's recognition was particularly notable given its non-partisan approach to world affairs.

That same month, but separately, the Irish and British Parliaments also decided to recognise Palestine.

Despite Britain being the closest US ally, British parliamentarians voted overwhelmingly by 274-12 for a Palestinian state. The Irish decision enjoyed so much consensus support among parliamentarians that the proposal was passed without a vote.

Last month, Spanish lawmakers made a similar move. On Nov 18, MPs voted in a landslide 319-2 (with one abstention) in favour of recognising Palestine.

Although like the others the decision was non-binding, all of Spain's political groups in the lower house of Parliament supported it. The writing on the wall was becoming clearer for Israel by the day.

Then earlier in the week, French MPs also voted to recognise Palestine. Although the 339-151 vote may not exactly have been a landslide, it was nonetheless a convincing and substantial two-thirds majority.

In all these European efforts, the motive was not to take the “side” of the Palestinians or Israel. Rather, it was to give new life to negotiations that under US leadership had gone nowhere.

In Palestine’s 2012 bid at the UN, Germany and the Netherlands had abstained rather than voted against. These countries could be next in voting to recognise Palestine.

As a bloc, the EU may be reluctant to be seen as taking too forward a step on the issue in any direction, although that has not dampened initiatives by individual EU countries.

In time, however, the EU may not be against the idea of taking over from the US the leadership in brokering negotiations. In the absence of any progress so far, how many other alternatives can there be as a solution?

Israel can, nonetheless, be relied upon to block and protest against these moves. It has already called in various European ambassadors to scold them for their governments’ decisions to recognise Palestine.

With continued US “leadership”, Israel can rest assured that talks placing Palestine and Israel as equal parties entering into negotiations will continue to fail. It can be confident that even if talks begin to look promising, the terms will be weighted in its favour.

But if Europe were to take over the role thus far held by the US, Israel may not necessarily be the favoured party. It may then have to begin considering making serious concessions in negotiations.

In recent days, however, the Swedish government that made the bold step of triggering European action had collapsed over stiff opposition to a domestic budgeting issue. But as Sweden heads for new elections next year, its position on Palestine and Israel is unlikely to change.

Support for Sweden’s decision runs deep. Last month, King Carl XVI Gustaf formally congratulated Palestine on its National Day.

In the other European countries that also came out in support of a Palestinian state, that support was often also bipartisan. The opposition parties are as much if not more in support of recognising Palestine.

While Sweden experienced a collapse of its political leadership, Israel suffered the same fate after Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu fired two key ministers.

As both countries head for new elections next year, Sweden's political values and principles are more likely to prevail – and be respected.

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