

Yossi Beilin

It's time to admit the peace process is dead, says the architect of Oslo

Yossi Beilin, who served as Israeli Justice Minister and Deputy Foreign Minister, conducted the secret peace negotiations that led to the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

You have called on the Palestinian Authority, which was supposed to be the Palestinian state in embryo, to dissolve itself. Why now?

The Oslo Peace Process called for an interim agreement that would last five years and end with a permanent settlement. It has dragged on for almost 20 years. What was supposed to be a corridor leading to a final settlement has become a living room – a very convenient one – for people like Prime Minister Netanyahu and for the opposition in Palestine. They want to keep the status quo.

You could have admitted defeat a decade ago

Since 2001, when Ariel Sharon was elected as Prime Minister, dissolving the Palestinian Authority could have been the right idea. But it had become too convenient for everybody. The Palestinians established their own institutions, their own ministries, and they could offer people jobs. Nobody can blame them. And for the world, after so many years, there was finally an address for the Palestinians. For the opponents it was wonderful because nothing happened. And for the peace camp, it was not so bad, as it kept a glimmer of hope. In reality, it created a fig leaf for a process that was non-existent, except for a very short time in 2008.

Surely the Palestinian leaders will never dissolve their administration?

They have a deep feeling of frustration. They know the Palestinian Authority is not a real authority. They know that even in Area A, under full Palestinian control, the Israeli army comes at night to arrest people as if it was part of Israel. We



Yossi Beilin: status quo is too convenient

should examine the practicalities of dissolution.

You mean Hamas taking over the West Bank?

No, not at all. The realities on the ground. Say 180,000 people work for the Palestinian Authority, with about one million benefiting from their salaries. These people, doctors, teachers and nurses, will not be fired the moment Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, gives Netanyahu the keys to the West Bank. Somebody will have to run daily life. It will not be Israelis, though the Israelis will be the officers, and they will have to be recruited again. The Palestinian leadership will just become part of the PLO, as they are already, and the PLO will become stronger in the West Bank. So it is not such a big revolution for the Palestinians, but it will be very significant burden for Israel. The existing security arrangements with Israel will not be available. The budget will not come from foreign donors. This might trigger American involvement, or an Israeli understanding that the status quo is intolerable.

More and more people are saying that the window of opportunity for the two-state solution is closed

This is nonsense. I don't believe there is any prospect of Israel having a non-Zionist prime minister. So there is no

chance of have a single state for Jews and Arabs or a bi-national state. Israel will never be a part of a bi-national state.

So what is going to happen?

Even if, God forbid, more settlements are built in the West Bank, at a certain moment Israel may withdraw, even unilaterally, and no one can prevent that. If it is a government of the Right, the withdrawal would be to a line near the separation barrier. Israel will say, you do what you want. You want to have a state, be our guest; you don't want to have a state, be our guest. There would be no solution to the refugee problem or to Jerusalem, and Israel would annexe 8 per cent of the West Bank. There would be no agreement on passages, security, or the electromagnetic spectrum, or water.

When might that be?

I believe that in a matter of three or four years the world will see there is a majority of Palestinians between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. At the moment there are 5.6 million Palestinians and about 6.4 million Jews. The 6.4 million includes non-Jews, such as the 300,000 Christians who came to Israel with their families from Russia. So we are talking of something like 5.6 million Palestinians and about 6 million Jews. Natural growth will change this balance very soon. I don't think the world — the Americans — will accept it. Many Israelis will not accept it. If the Prime Minister of Israel is not ready to go for a comprehensive solution such as outlined in the Geneva Initiative (2003), he will do what Sharon did – withdraw behind the separation barrier.

Who is going to accept such a solution?

There is a border and it was built by a Likud leader named Sharon. In Israel, there is some legitimacy to withdrawing to the border, if push comes to shove. ●

Interview by Alan Philps

Democracy lobby under siege

Western NGOs feel the pressure as autocrats quake, says Nicolas Bouchet

After the end of the Cold War international non-governmental organisations, mostly funded by Western countries, fanned out across the globe to teach the ways of liberal democracy.

Not surprisingly, this prompted a reaction by authoritarian regimes, which has now turned into a global backlash.

The uncertain response from America and Europe to growing restrictions on democracy NGOs is encouraging governments to push even harder against what they see as a direct threat.

Today the spotlight is on Cairo, where 43 Egyptian and foreign NGO staff are on trial for operating unlicensed and with illegal foreign funding. If their trial, due to resume in June, leads to convictions and prison terms, the backlash will reach a high-water mark.

'Never before has a government attacked democracy programmes in such a pointed, harsh way,' said Thomas Carothers, an expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

In April, Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, raised the alarm about efforts to cut off international support for civil society. She highlighted Egypt, but listed developments in countries from Belarus and Cambodia to Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

The backlash against democracy assistance predates the Arab Spring. The effectiveness of internationally backed civil society was highlighted by Slobodan Milosevic's fall in Serbia in 2000. Rulers unsure of their popular support took note, and, to judge by the similarity of the laws they passed to restrict foreign NGOs, swapped notes as well.

Russia, notably, has tightened restrictions on foreign organizations to preclude a 'colour revolution' such as Georgia's and Ukraine's, which the Kremlin saw as the result of Western plotting.

Egypt combines elements in a way

that worries democracy organizations. It goes beyond the usual obstructions and pursues expulsions and criminal prosecutions. Locals and foreigners alike have been targeted. And, while such clashes have usually involved adversaries, this one involves two allies.

'That this comes from a government in the midst of an attempted transition to democracy and that enjoys a close relationship with the United States and other Western governments is especially surprising and dispiriting,' said Carothers.

After Hosni Mubarak fell, Washington fast-tracked \$65 million for democracy programmes in Egypt, where international NGOs had previously gained little access. The surge in activities by foreign groups antagonized Egypt's generals who accused them of political meddling.

The NGOs targeted include Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute, high-profile organizations closely linked to America's political elite. By sending security forces to raid their offices last November and persisting with the prosecutions despite American pressure, the generals, no doubt smarting from Barack Obama's abandonment of Mubarak, have dared Washington to choose between its democracy rhetoric and its strategic interests in the region. The generals have not suffered any consequences.

Foreign NGO employees were allowed to leave Egypt in March after collectively posting bail of \$5 million. Soon after, the Obama administration waived a legislative condition tying this year's \$1.3 billion in military assistance to Egypt

'Never before have democracy NGOs been attacked in such a pointed way'

to the authorities' support for the transition to democracy. The matter could have ended there, but Egypt has since put the NGO staff on trial, asked Interpol to issue arrest warrants for the departed Americans and refused registration to other US-based groups.

Egypt's example appears to be encouraging similar acts of nose-thumbing at the West. Bahrain has increased visa restrictions for human rights groups. The United Arab Emirates has expelled NDI and the polling organization Gallup, and ordered Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation to shut its office. Foreign NDI employees were briefly detained and threatened with criminal charges.

In Russia Vladimir Putin has accused America of fomenting protests and financing the opposition during December's parliamentary elections. Moscow is considering a new law that would further restrict foreign financing of NGOs and has denounced an American plan for a \$50 million fund to support Russian civil society.

'There are very real concerns with regards to the restricting of political space for civil society,' noted Pär Engström, a human-rights expert at University College, London. 'But at the same time, we should be aware of efforts by powerful states, and particularly the United States, to channel their preferences through non-state actors.'

Openings for international democracy NGOs are narrowing in many countries. They need to adapt to an increasingly chilly climate.

A central part of this must be more open discussion of how their actions are undeniably political, however much they strive for non-partisanship, and how their links to Western governments are perceived. ●

Nicolas Bouchet is co-editor of US Presidents and Democracy Promotion (Routledge, forthcoming 2012)