Palestine: the hollowness of the public sphere, and the absence of institutions

Walid Salem

20 February 2018

The philosophers of social sciences elaborated on the public sphere and its importance. The German philosopher Habermas defined it as the domain within which all interactions between citizens take place, based on the association of citizenship that brings them together. According to this definition, the public sphere comes after the family and the clan, which on the contrary represents a private space built on the blood bond.

On the other hand, civil society, which represents the total voluntary and volunteering initiatives of citizens to develop themselves and their society humanely, economically, socially and politically, is one of the major factors in the public sphere. The latter also includes actors such as state institutions and political parties. The latter is part of civil society in addition to its membership in the political community.

In this brief theoretical outline, it should be added that the interactions in the public sphere reflect the development and dynamics of society. A society under tyranny suffers from narrow public space, scarcity of interactions within it, limited to interactions among elites, poverty in the quality of human capital, and the creation of a society of obedience and impotence, following the "order of the lord", which eliminates reason and freedom, and produces subordinate adherents of hypocrites who seek to fulfil their own interests at the expense of the common good.

A free, democratic society free of shackles is a society of broad public space, open to all trends and colourings without restrictions on and charges of disbelief, treachery and intolerance or a monopoly of the truth. It is a society that accepts the other and respects diversity and tolerance, and is a society of institutions, beyond the control of an individual or an authoritarian group. It is also a society that helps unleash individual/group intellectual, psychological and physical energies to develop and build its well-being, economy and self-reliance in an atmosphere that enhances critical thinking and creativity, accepting criticism without bad feelings or arrogance. It is a society that respects competencies in order to achieve development as an alternative to "the society of the one knowledgeable man" who decrees and decides on everything. It is a community where there is interaction between the elite and the general citizen and not a society which engenders a gap between them. It is a society in which the qualitative human capital of all its people grows and develops continuously and dynamically.
Where are we with all this in Palestine, where the occupation controls what we know, and when we know what it is doing? We also know, however, of the culture of justification that refers everything to the occupation. In this context, we must recognize that our internal situation is not good, as it raises dozens of questions about Palestinian public space, which has become so narrow that it can no longer accommodate the existence of the other, especially in the relationship between the elite and the people, the former afraid of criticism and punishing the free for his/her opinions and actions, as well as punishing the people for failing to bring about true development, and the resultant unemployment, hunger and poverty.

Our thinker Edward Said talked about Palestinian society as a moderate and tolerant society. Are we that now? Our thinker Ibrahim Abu Lughud spoke of our society as having been historically distinguished by participation, pluralism and elections. Where is the participation today? Why is division continuing as an alternative to participation? Why do people in Gaza, Jerusalem, and the West Bank feel that they are separate areas, each with their own reality and different concerns, accompanied by bitter feelings of marginalization, particularly in Gaza and Jerusalem? Why do young men and women feel marginalized, and civil society excluded? Why do we see selfishness rise to the surface and self-interest pursued as an alternative to an individualism responsible to itself and its country? Why, on the other hand, do young people sacrifice for the homeland without being given the care and support to make their struggle more effective? Why is participation for development absent from local communities and not bottom-up?

What is the state of pluralism and its associated acceptance of the other and the rule of the language of dialogue, as opposed to the language of treachery and charges of treason and judgments based on hearsay and information received without scrutiny?

Where are the elections, that have not taken place since the last elections for the Palestinian Authority 12 years ago? The PLO does not know elections at all. Where are the elections in civil society institutions? The absence of elections has led to the emergence of a political authority (as well as institutions) that does not respect citizens. This authority does not care for citizens’ opinions and/or advice. It rules individually, marginalizes collective decisions and does not care to listen to people's opinions because it no longer needs their votes to remain in office.

The above is not created by the occupation. They are our own creation, and their existence and persistence weaken our struggle against the occupation, as evidence shows.

The emptiness of the public space has become unbearable, with public issues being debated and brought up exclusively by the elite. There are also taboos that prevent public discussion of issues such as secularism and religion, for example. This has resulted in restrictions on the freedom of
expression that define what is permitted and what is forbidden. The security of authority has given authority the power to arrest journalists and activists, as is happening repeatedly. Members and groups appoint themselves as rulers, govern what is being said and written, humiliating one and praising the other according to closed standards. Should we collude and promote a culture of fear and not say anything? Why do we also become fragmented in closed circles, each of which meets and debates on its own, knows nothing about the other circles, does not seek to know about them, but rather perceives them based on prejudices, or based on what is said in the backbiting and slander sessions, or in the media? Why do we lack direct disclosure and dialogue as an alternative to arbitrarily and inexplicably issuing judgments? Why do we know what will be issued by each of these circles before it is issued, where we have reached a stage of repetition without creativity, especially in the area of "strategies" produced and then reproduced without scrutiny?

The public space cavity is associated with the absence of the institution, backed by the government or the rule of one person. It is well-known that institutional decisions are issued for public consumption and are not geared for implementation. There is a lesson in the decisions of the last two sessions of the PLO Central Council. We also have an example of institutions that have become one-man institutions or one-man shows, to the detriment of collective decision-making and action.

The need to change all of this is very urgent and vital to our continued existence, survival and steadfastness, just as we need water and air. The first axioms of life are that the people who are subject to existential challenge must come together and find the formula to overcome it. We must admit that we are not together.

As first steps, we must reconsider the horizontal distribution of power in Palestinian society by activating the Legislative Council, strengthening the independence of the judiciary, stopping the executive branch from issuing procedures and decrees, ending the division of our people by uniting in action as an alternative to the continuation of useless dialogue about reconciliation.

We must also distribute power vertically in Palestinian society, so that civil society, local government bodies, and civil liberties are restored and there is active participation of both the elite and common man, as well as among people in the development process at the community level, thereby promoting self-reliance as an alternative to continued begging from donor countries.

This is to be accompanied by renewed rejuvenation of the culture of dialogue and a renewed public debate of the serious issues. The aim must be to re-energize political life and debate between competing political programmes, to unleash the energies of individuals and groups in free
critical thinking and creativity, and to promote this in schools and between young women and young people, and all institutions of society. This has to be coupled with launching reconciliation initiatives and closing the gaps between Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem from the bottom-up, and promoting the welfare and prosperity of society as a whole.

Thus, we can build a society of citizenship, not a society of arbitrariness and control in the name of citizenship. In this way, officials turn from “officials who work for us” to “working with us, for us and for them”. The difference between these two formulae is the difference between the decision-maker who is a top-down caretaker and the decision-maker who is a participatory, democratic leader.