



The EU and its paradoxes: enforcing stability not promoting democracy

Tariq Dana¹

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Abstract

This critical analysis explores the contradictions between the European Union's (EU) democracy promotion rhetoric and the underlying motivations behind these efforts, specifically in the context of the 2006 Palestinian elections. Contrary to the traditional perception that EU democracy promotion aims to establish and strengthen democratic institutions and practices, this review argues that the primary goal is often to enforce stability under the expansive settler-colonial structure. The Palestinian elections of 2006 serve as a pertinent case study to illustrate this paradox. The EU's response to the victory of Hamas was marked by inconsistencies and contradictions, revealing the tension between its democracy promotion rhetoric and the prioritization of a kind of stability based on Israeli terms.

Keywords Democracy promotion · European Union · Palestinian elections · Palestinian Authority · Hamas · Settler-colonialism

During the Palestinian Authority's (PA) elections for the presidency in 2005 and Legislative Council in 2006, I volunteered as an electoral observer in Hebron district in the southern part of the occupied West Bank. As a local observer, I represented a local civil society organization, which along with dozens of local organizations, received generous EU funding in preparation for the elections. The EU fund aimed at promoting various elections-related initiatives, such as training local observers and implementing "democratic education" workshops. I recall how such activities were intensive. I used to receive dozens of invitations on weekly basis to attend a workshop here or training there.

Since the early 1990s, the U.S, the EU, UN agencies, and other Western actors embarked on a global project under the banner of "democracy promotion." The democracy promotion paradigm was further intensified following the events of September 11 and became a major foreign policy instrument justifying interventions in

✉ Tariq Dana
tariq.dana@dohainstitute.edu.qa

¹ Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar



various non-Western contexts, violently or normatively. As one of the largest democracy promoters globally, the EU invested heavily in professing liberal democracy as a superior model of governance. Liberal democracy is believed to be a universally applicable model that can achieve international peace, stability, and economic development. Yet, the EU democracy promotion experiments were, in effect, detached from the peculiarities of local contexts, overlooking the very essence of democracy, its historical prerequisites, and the sociopolitical, economic, and institutional underpinning of democratic change. Rather, the promotion of liberal democracy has been narrowly associated with quantifiable procedures, mainly defined by elections and an array of technical packages of institutional reform, good governance, civil society promotion, rule of law, human rights, and free-market reform. Not only the democratization illusion failed, but also destabilized societies and states. Democracy promotion is neocolonial venture that aims to accommodate Western geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests, while the actual needs of those subject to intervention are often undermined, resulting in new forms of crisis, conflicts, and inequalities (Chandler 2010).

Indeed, I was hardly convinced about this dynamic. Neither about the PA elections nor about the US and EU insistence to democratize the PA regime. Overall, my understanding departed from four fundamental beliefs. First, promoting liberal democracy under the settler colonial condition is a futile logic, especially because it seeks to “democratize” a structurally violent and repressive context without tackling the root cause. Mandy Turner (2006) suggested that the Palestinian elections occurred within the democratic peace framework, which is a flawed approach that completely ignores the structural reasons for the crisis. Second, institutional reform within the Oslo framework is typically designed to accommodate Israeli demands, not Palestinian needs. In fact, almost every reform undergone by the PA has been inadequate, superficial, and resulted in an increased political concession, internal repression, and institutional corruption while the Israeli colonial dynamic has been further eased and left unchallenged. Third, narrowing down the very idea of democracy with all of its complex and sophisticated institutional, socioeconomic and political underpinnings to a merely technical and electoral process is likely to lead to disastrous outcomes. Finally, democracy cannot be enforced or promoted by external powers, especially by those with a colonial legacy that tend to manipulate electoral outcomes for their own interest. Democracy is primarily generated by homegrown needs, consciousness, and transformative processes.

Catherine Charrett’s well-researched and detailed book affirms this understanding. By investigating the central role of the EU in the 2006 PA elections, and the EU’s subsequent reaction to the peoples’ democratic choice as reflected in the victory of the Islamic movement Hamas, the book reveals another layer of EU hypocrisy in engaging with the question of Palestine. Whereas the EU affirmed the candidacy of Hamas electoral list to the legislative council and declared the electoral process free, fair, and transparent, it actively denied the Palestinians the right to democratic representation. The book demonstrates how the reaction of the EU has been extremely counterproductive and mounts to a form of collective punishment against the Palestinians because of their democratic choice.



Tellingly, the EU enthusiasm for Palestinian elections was not driven by the desire to promote genuine democracy—as often proclaimed in official reports and statements—but rather by “a dominant belief, and also expectation that Fatah would win” (Charrett 2019, 265). Although much of the EU investment in the elections was ostensibly based on the rhetoric of “peace,” the main motive lays in enforcing what Oslo was supposed to secure: stability as an indefinite political status quo.

Enforcing stability could be easier to realize if Fatah could maintain unchallenged control over the PA centers of power. Yet, the elections were important for restoring Fatah’s legitimacy after years of poor performance, political concessions, and widespread corruption and mismanagement which eroded its popularity among the Palestinians. Equally important was the fact that electoral legitimacy is a key to ensuring popular consent for reconstructing post-Arafat politics along the line of the Western-sponsored reform of the PA civil and security institutions.

The 2006 election result blew apart the EU expectation and the entire democracy promotion paradigm in the OPT. Hamas won 43% of the vote in the legislative council, giving it a decisive majority with 74 of the 132 seats. While Hamas’s overwhelming victory was surprising even to Hamas itself, Fatah’s defeat was inevitable. This signals a paradigm shift in Palestinian politics, overturning forty years of Fatah dominance over Palestinian national institutions and representation.

Although many voters were not ideologically affiliated with political Islam, they favored Hamas for several reasons. Hamas proved a trustworthy actor in distributing welfare services through its wide network of social and charitable associations. Unlike the EU-funded local NGOs that are detached from social constituents and prefer to maintain a professional outlook, and in contrast to the corruption and neopatrimonialism of the Fatah-dominated PA institutions, Hamas-linked organizations maintained fair distribution of services and close links with the marginalized strata of the population. Hamas’s experience in service provision persuaded many Palestinians that it can do better than Fatah in managing the public institutions. Moreover, Hamas’s defiant rhetoric against the occupation resonates with most Palestinians who lost confidence in Fatah’s complicity in the PA security and civil coordination with the Israeli authorities. The Palestinian leaning toward the resistance discourse was largely fueled by the disillusionment of peace promises and the non-existence of meaningful political negotiations. Indeed, Hamas marketed its willingness to participate in the elections as the result of a realization that the Oslo process had been eliminated by the Second Intifada, believing that the movement must play an active role in shaping the post-Arafat/ post-intifada political order (Dana 2019). Yet it should be noted that Hamas appeared to moderate its political position after the second intifada and hinted at the acceptance of the two-state solution. Whereas democracy promoters sought to utilize the elections for legitimizing Fatah’s dominance, the Palestinians choose to punish Fatah and its international backers.

For many, Hamas’s victory represented an opportunity for the EU to engage constructively with the Islamist party, which had then demonstrated high flexibility and pragmatism. Charrett remarkably captures this lost opportunity:

An opportunity was missed to engage with Hamas. There was an opportunity to engage more openly and more constructively with Hamas following



its success in the 2006 elections. There was a possibility to perhaps listen to Hamas, assist Hamas in its transition into government. An opportunity to meet and discuss with Hamas. But this did not happen.

As the US, EU, and Israel received Hamas's electoral victory with shock, they responded with an anti-democratic policy to destabilize the democratically elected government. The election of Hamas has been a severe wake-up call for the EU to face up to the fact that democratization may not always produce desirable results. The pre-elections miscalculation and the post-elections exploitations of Palestinian internal affairs were used by Israel as a fig leaf to leverage its mechanism of control over Palestinian life. As argued by Charrett "Since 2006 Hamas has been invoked as a powerful symbol to control alternative discussions around Palestinian politics. Israeli, American, and European state and mainstream media actors use Hamas as a signifier to close down serious political discussions around the continued Occupation of Palestine." (Charrett 2019, 121).

Most importantly, the international rejection of the results of 2006 elections paved the way for deep-seated divisions and crises within Palestinian politics and society. Fatah and Hamas had fundamental disagreements over various issues. Yet this could have been mitigated if the EU demonstrated some consistency with its democracy promotion rhetoric. At least, it could have supported the PA unity government compromise, formed in September 2006 by both Hamas and Fatah and other Palestinian factions. Instead, the EU joined the US in implementing a combination of "isolation and pressure" and "divide and rule" approaches by halting aid to the Hamas government and diverting financial and diplomatic support to the PA's office of president, Mahmoud Abbas, and his security apparatus. Backed by the US and the EU, Abbas moved to concentrate power in the president's office to weaken the Hamas-dominated parliament. He issued presidential decrees that gave him absolute power over the hiring of PA civil and security servants, appointing new judges in the constitutional court to abort new laws by the parliament, and controlling the PA security forces (Usher 2006, 28).

External pressure fueled tensions between Hamas and Fatah, culminating in a semi-civil war in 2007 which resulted in Hamas swiftly taking over the Gaza Strip. This marked a turning point in the history of Palestinian politics, where the already disconnected Palestinian territories became politically and institutionally divided into two rival authorities: a de-facto government in Gaza led by Hamas and the Fatah-dominated PA in the West Bank.

The single most important driver of the semi-civil war was the fact that external forces, including the EU, moved to delegitimize the electoral result. They, explicitly and implicitly, encouraged the defeated Fatah party to turn against the legitimate government. After the Hamas seizure of power over the Gaza Strip, the PA security forces in the West Bank cracked down on Hamas infrastructure, arrested many of its leaders and cadres, and shut down dozens of charitable and social associations. Human Rights Watch (2008) reported that the PA campaign against Hamas had "the political and financial support of Israel, the United States and European Union, which likewise wanted to see Hamas's influence in Palestinian politics reduced or eliminated."



While the blame must be put on the Hamas-Fatah rivalry in the first place, the persistence of the intra-Palestinian division and its lasting impact on the Palestinian national fabric has fundamentally been shaped and encouraged by external interference. The EU has played an important role in sustaining this crisis. In close coordination with the US and Israel, the EU undertook several policy measures that ended up transforming the division into the new status quo. On one hand, the EU intensified its support for Ramallah-based PA's institution building and economic development, providing approximately 1 billion euro from 2008 to 2012. On the other hand, the EU joined the Israeli-imposed blockade on Gaza by banning all forms of diplomatic and financial assistance, leaving humanitarian operations to UN agencies and NGOs.

It is striking to see how the EU politics toward Palestine is informed by blatant contradictions between rhetoric and policies. It rhetorically endorses the two-state solution but is politically and diplomatically active in supporting Israeli actions (for example, Israeli right to "self-defense"). It calls on the Palestinians to hold elections but then delegitimizes the democratically elected government. Its officials repeatedly called on Israel to remove the blockade on Gaza, but concurrently the EU pursues a policy that deepened the blockade and Palestinian division. Paradoxically, the democracy promotion slogan has dramatically turned into professionalizing the PA authoritarianism through its support to the PA police and security (Tartir 2018). Most recently, the EU embarked on highly restrictive financial conditionality on Palestinian civil society organizations in the West Bank. Those organizations mainly work in the legal and development spheres, and the new conditionality hindered their advocacy and developmental activities on the ground. For example, while the EU proclaims it will not recognize any Israeli attempt to annex Area C or the Jordan Valley, the cutting of aid would obstruct the work of Palestinian organizations that support communities threatened by Israeli dispossession in these areas.

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