

THE HYPOCRISY OF WESTERN DEMOCRACY

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U.S. Deputy Ambassador to the U.N. Robert A. Wood raises his hand during a United Nations Security Council meeting on Gaza at the U.N. headquarters in New York City on December 8, 2023. | Photo Credit: AFP

With a staggering 17,000 Gazans already killed since October 7, Palestine is seeing one of its greatest tragedies. The West has shockingly enabled this in various ways: it has supported Israel's "right to defend" by reducing Palestine to Hamas; conflated critiques of Zionism and the Israeli state with anti-Semitism; weaponised the Holocaust; and attempted to erase history (the White House described Hamas' attack as "unprovoked").

Western societies that profess democracy have also scotched their own people's freedom of expression — not with official diktats but by demonising and targeting citizens speaking in support of Palestine. Western universities have become the major ground for this. In Ivy League institutions such as Harvard and Columbia, the private details of students who signed pro-Palestine letters have been made public. Prominent Jewish donors (and supporters of the Israeli state) have withdrawn funding from universities including Harvard and Pennsylvania alleging inaction against anti-Semitism and anti-Israel speeches on campuses (note: 45% of Harvard's revenue of \$5.8 billion in 2022 came from philanthropy). University administrations in North America put out official statements condemning only Hamas. And scholars working on Palestinian freedom have faced various unwritten codes of harassment.

The media has been key in framing the Palestine-Israel conflict for Western citizens for 75 years. The fundamental problem here, with a few honourable exceptions, has been the overwhelming bias towards Israel. As 1,200 academics and educators from North America noted in a recent open letter, the historical roots of the violence as well as the illegality of Israeli occupation in international law are not discussed. Words such as apartheid, ethnic cleansing, genocidal intent, settler colonialism — used by scholars, human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch, prominent Israeli rights group B'Tselem, and the United Nations, to describe Israeli actions — go missing in discourse.

The liberal face of institutions like Hollywood now stands exposed. The initial lack of response to the Hamas attack by unions such as the Writers Guild of America led to a backlash. Then, about 700 people from the entertainment industry signed an open letter declaring their support for Israel. On the other hand, pro-Palestinian voices chose to remain anonymous in their letters to avoid being doxxed or blacklisted as anti-Semitic. Some actors, artist agents, and magazine

editors have had to face professional consequences.

The most egregious actions have taken place in Europe, the supposed bastion of free speech. Countries including the U.K., France, Germany, and Italy emphatically declared their support for Israel and imposed various kinds of bans (some of them blanket) on pro-Palestinian protests. Austria, for instance, banned a pro-Palestinian demonstration citing the inclusion of the phrase “from the River to the Sea” in invitations, as a justification. Ironically, this is the same “free” Europe where blasphemy laws are abolished (Denmark, Sweden) and caricatures of religion are allowed (France) and have led to burnings of the Koran and cartoons on Prophet Muhammad.

There is no denying that there are inflammatory positions, fake news articles, and also celebration of brutality on both sides of the divide, all of which are not conducive to reasoned debates. If incidents of racism towards Palestinians/Arabs have increased, so has anti-Semitism.

But the root cause of Western complicity in Palestinian oppression lies in colonialism and imperialism, which is masked by the façade of liberal democracy. Democracy has seemingly thrived in the West, which has perpetuated colonialism and imperialism elsewhere. But even those democratic freedoms at home seem under threat now.

The way out of the complicity in Israel’s colonisation of Palestine can only be through an exposé of the hypocrisies of Western democracy. This has been undertaken by those on the margins of this democracy. For instance, the Canadian government-appointed National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was forced to acknowledge that the Canadian state has perpetrated genocide against the Indigenous people. There is resistance to the war in Palestine, not just by Arabs and Palestinians but also by Jewish dissenters. The horrors unfolding in Gaza are also changing opinions. Mainstream Western media has given more space to Palestinian stories this time, even if they are not enough. In recent U.S. opinion polls, almost 70% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning voters under 35 years disapproved of President Joe Biden’s support to Israel.

As the Israeli carnage in Gaza resumes, the West has to listen to people such as Israel-born Omer Bartov, one of the world’s foremost Holocaust scholars, who, while rightly expressing empathy with the Jewish victims of Hamas’ heinous war crimes, warned of genocide and asked leaders and scholars “to publicly warn against the rage- and vengeance-filled [Israeli] rhetoric that dehumanises the population of Gaza...”

As another Holocaust scholar Raz Segal asserted, “No justice is possible... without a truthful reckoning of how we got here.” The West must acknowledge its own monstrous role in getting Palestine to this precipice.

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