

Release Marwan Barghouti and All Palestinian Political Prisoners

(Ahmed Kathrada is an anti-apartheid leader. He launched the Release Mandela Campaign and was imprisoned a year later, spending 26 years in apartheid jails. On October 27 on Robben Island, he launched the International Campaign to Free Marwan Barghouti and All Palestinian Prisoners.)

By Ahmed Kathrada

Marwan Barghouti, a leading Palestinian political prisoner being held for life in Israel, has spent nearly two decades of his life in Israeli jails, including the past 11 years. Approximately 30 others, who later this month are expected to exchange prison cells for larger prisons in occupied Palestine, are returning to a very different world – grown children, an even more dire political landscape, and a West that denigrates them while ignoring the crimes of their jailers.

Only a political prisoner can fully comprehend the ordeal of a fellow political prisoner. The experiences of solitary confinement, ill-treatment, separation from the outside world, and the progressive erosion of the concept of time, cannot be fully translated into words. Imprisonment leaves behind deep scars, both in your flesh and in your soul.

Together with leaders such as Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, I spent more than a quarter of a century in the dungeons of apartheid in defence of an ideal that eventually triumphed: freedom and a non-racial and non-sexist, democratic South Africa. Like Israel today, the apartheid government framed our case as a “security threat”, while it was evident that we were political prisoners fighting a legitimate

struggle for national liberation against an oppressive and racist regime.

When people today think of South Africa they instantly recall the image of the smiling Mandela walking out of prison, to be welcomed by cheering crowds. Little do they remember the personal sacrifices that he and his fellow prisoners made over the years in apartheid prisons before reaching that moment.

I think of my cramped prison cell and I visualize my fellow freedom fighter Marwan Barghouti and other Palestinian prisoners. Since 1967, over 800,000 Palestinians have endured imprisonment at some point in their lives. This is a very striking example of mass detention, aimed at breaking the will of an entire people. Some of them have spent over 30 years in Israeli jails, setting shameful world records for the longest period of political detention. Others have lost their lives due to ill-treatment or lack of healthcare. Children in Palestine experience detention and apartheid, as several generations did in South Africa.

The unconditional release of political prisoners is a powerful signal that the hardened enemies of yesterday are finally ready to become peace partners today.

We know from our own experiences that the will of oppressed peoples is unbreakable. The Palestinians prove this every day. From behind bars, Palestinian prisoners have launched protests and hunger strikes to claim their rights.

Currently, about 5,000 Palestinians remain in Israeli jails. Israel's violation of their rights, including their right to a fair trial, to be treated humanely and to receive family visits, is disgraceful. Mass arrests of men, women and children, arbitrary detention as well as imprisonment of elected representatives, all of this is a painful reminder of the injustice we suffered under South Africa's state of emergency. Were the international community consistent, this

treatment of Palestinians would have triggered a wave of condemnations and sanctions.

Marwan Barghouti was sentenced to five life sentences plus 40 years, by Israeli courts that regularly prove they are instruments of occupation rather than of justice. He was the first member of parliament to be arrested. Many more would follow. A widely popular Palestinian leader, a unifying figure, and a strong advocate of peace based on international law, he was the principal architect of the "prisoners' document" crafted by incarcerated Palestinian leaders paving a peaceful way towards unity, freedom and peace.

Some make the unacceptable argument that prisoners should be released only after peace between conflicting parties is concluded. This disregards what has proven to be the case in other conflicts – that prisoners, once released, can be instrumental in achieving peace. The unconditional release of political prisoners is a powerful signal that the hardened enemies of yesterday are finally ready to become peace partners today. As I follow the phased releases of the pre-Oslo prisoners, I wonder why they had to wait more than 20 years after the signing of the Oslo peace agreement in 1993.

I am no stranger to injustice. I suffered from it since my early years and for most of my life. In my recent visit to Palestine I saw it in some of its ugliest forms: Palestinian homes being demolished; the monstrous Wall of separation and shame; the military checkpoints; the spreading of Israeli settlements. I saw oppression and segregation. Mandela stated that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinian people. We look at Palestine today as it pursues its long walk to freedom and we cannot help but remember what we endured under apartheid.

Unfortunately, Israel has not yet committed itself to ending its occupation of Palestine. Even as negotiations have long started, and faltered, Israel continues to entrench its

occupation. It was the struggles of our people combined with international pressure that led to the release of Mandela and the negotiated transition to a democratic South Africa. We, therefore, have a sacred duty to campaign for the unconditional release of Marwan Barghouti and all Palestinian political prisoners as an essential step towards the freedom of the Palestinian people and peace in the region. Apartheid, after being vanquished in South Africa, cannot be allowed to triumph in Palestine.

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