

## Arrested Development

Arafat cracks down on criticism of the Palestinian Authority and puts some outspoken dissidents in jail

By Lisa Beyer

It was almost as if the bad guys were working from a textbook on tyranny. First, security officials arrested a group of signatories to a pamphlet criticizing the performance of the Palestinian Authority. Next, authorities suggested the petitioners were in league with foreign agents. Then, jailers got some of the detainees to backpedal. And finally came the clincher: three masked gunmen approached one of the initiators of the document and pumped three bullets into his foot.

Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority, charged with self-rule in parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, has had a poor record on human rights since its inception five years ago. Last week's events solidified that lousy reputation. Still, the PA has probably not heard the last from its critics. The offending pamphlet contained the most vehement language yet against the Authority from any mainstream Palestinian group. And despite the crackdown, at least some of the petitioners remained unbowed.

In the leaflet, published at the end of last month, 20 Palestinian professionals and politicians complained that the PA was corrupt and was "selling out" the homeland in the peace process with Israel. They termed the PA a "small group ruling roughly and stealing" and charged that Arafat "had opened the gates for opportunists to spread corruption on the Palestinian street." Arafat's anti-peace opponents, notably from the Islamic group Hamas, have made pointed remarks in unsigned leaflets, but never have such censures been aired by establishment figures willing to sign their names. According to a close aide, Arafat was particularly enraged by the reference to him. "He was furious that he was targeted," said the source.

Rather than achieving a Palestinian state, dismantlement of Jewish settlements on Palestinian land and a just solution for Palestinian refugees, the protesters said the PA had delivered such "humiliations" as an expansion of settlements, more land confiscation by Israel and a "conspiracy" against the refugees.

Immediately, security officials jailed nine of the signatories and briefly put another two under house arrest. Dozens more were detained for distributing the leaflet. The remaining nine petitioners were exempt from the kind of retribution because of their membership in the elected Palestinian Council, a kind of legislature with no real power. Later, in a closed meeting of the council, Arafat loyalists proposed rescinding the immunity. That idea was not accepted, but the council did, by a 33 to 8 vote, harshly condemn the signatories, deeming their manifesto "a call to internal sedition and incitement." What's more, the council moved to form a committee to "monitor" the future behavior of members.

Meanwhile, PA officials said they were investigating the possibility that the pamphlet was part of a conspiracy engineered by Syria or Iran. "We are defending Palestinian interests," countered legislator Hassan Kreishah, a prominent signatory to the document. "We don't have outside loyalties." As he returned from the council meeting to his home in Nablus in the West Bank, another signatory, Mouawiyah al-Masri, was shot in the foot. He says he was able to lift the mask of one of his assailants and recognized the man as a member of the PA's security forces. Arafat's office promised a thorough investigation. No arrests were made following a similar attack in 1994 on PA critic Abdul Sattar Kassem, a political scientist at An-Najah University who was arrested last week as one of the 20 dissidents.

While five of the arrested petitioners, according to their jailers, signed statements saying they did not intend to harm Arafat's name or create internal strife, most of those who remain free are standing their ground. "I am not retreating," the wounded al-Masri said as he checked out of the hospital. "We stand behind every word," said legislator Kreishah. "If there is someone who ought to apologize, it is those who harmed the people." "The contents of the leaflet are public demands," added another legislator, Rawia Shawa, "and we are entitled to express them on behalf of the people."

In the peace negotiations with Israel, Arafat has certainly made many unpopular concessions. Still, polls show a firm majority of Palestinians – 75% in a November survey – support the process. According to a September poll, 71% of Palestinians believe corruption is widespread in PA institutions. Arafat's own wife, Suha, frequently complains that the Palestinian leader is surrounded by thieves. In an internal audit in 1997, the PA itself concluded that 37% of its budget was wasted or pilfered. After two additional reports on corruption, Arafat promised a cleanup, but his constituents are still waiting for it. Judging by his response to the challenge last week, he remains in an impenitent mood.