

Critic's Death Puts Focus on Palestinian Authority's Authoritarianism

Protests against the increasingly autocratic rule of President Mahmoud Abbas and his limits on freedom have been harshly suppressed.



Demonstrators reacting to Palestinian police officers at a June protest over the death of Nizar Banat, in Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

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July 7, 2021

RAMALLAH, West Bank — Hundreds of Palestinians massed in central Ramallah's Clock Tower Square one night in late June to protest the Palestinian Authority's brutality after an anti-corruption activist died in its custody. The activist, Nizar Banat, was seized in a wave of arrests and, his family said, Palestinian security officers had beaten him to death.

The protest was peaceful until a group of pro-government cadres from the ruling Fatah party descended on it.

Reporters for The New York Times saw them charge at protesters, including young women and boys, throw stones at them, beat them with clubs, flagpoles and fists, and snatch cellphones from people suspected of documenting the events.

The unrest over Mr. Banat, whose death at the hands of Palestinian officials has been compared to the killing of the Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi, has drawn fresh attention to what critics describe as the increasingly autocratic rule of Mahmoud

Abbas, the authority's octogenarian president, and its ever more blatant clampdown on any semblance of democratic process, freedom of expression, judicial independence and nongovernmental organizations.



Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas speaking at a meeting of the PLO executive committee and a Fatah Central Committee at the Palestinian Authority headquarters, in Ramallah in May this year.

“They are not hiding it anymore,” said Wissam Hussein, 29, a Palestinian yoga and meditation teacher who said he had been beaten and pepper-sprayed. “This is a second occupation actually, not really a government.”

Mr. Hussein, like many, was convinced that the assailants had been plainclothes Palestinian security officials. He described the Palestinian Authority as a corrupt “dictatorial group.”

The protests, which have spread to West Bank cities including Bethlehem and Hebron, come at a perilous time for Mr. Abbas.

His already dwindling popularity has plummeted since April when he canceled what would have been the first parliamentary and presidential elections in the occupied territories in over 15 years.

He took another blow in May when the Palestinian Authority's main rival, Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls Gaza, launched rockets against Israel, casting itself as the defender of Jerusalem and asserting its leadership of the Palestinian cause.

The ensuing war was followed by the arrests of dozens of critics of the authority across the West Bank.

During one recent protest, demonstrators marched toward Mr. Abbas’s headquarters in Ramallah chanting “The people want the fall of the regime,” the refrain that helped topple dictators in the Arab Spring.

When Mr. Abbas feels threatened, his “tolerance for dissent becomes less and less,” said Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, a polling organization in Ramallah.

“We are not yet Hafez al-Assad’s Syria or Saddam Hussein’s Iraq,” he said, referring to notorious dictatorships. “But from the separation of powers to free speech to a pluralistic society, all of this has come under attack.”



Demonstrators carrying pictures of Nizar Banat at a rally, in the West Bank city of Ramallah, in June.

The Palestinian Authority, which exercises limited self-rule in parts of the West Bank, was never meant to be a permanent government. Created in 1994, it was intended to last up to five years, by which time Israel and the Palestinians were supposed to have agreed on a final peace accord.

Peace talks have since stalled but the authority, supported by Europe and the United States, has carried on.

Palestinians have been torn in the past between protesting against the authority and Israel, which militarily occupies the territory. But the death of Mr. Banat and the harsh suppression of the protests that followed have reinforced a broadening sense among

some Palestinians that the authority has become little more than a convenient subcontractor for the occupation.

Mr. Banat, 42, was a house painter whose online broadsides against the authority had gained a substantial following. Family members said that Palestinian security officers burst into the Hebron home where Mr. Banat was staying on June 24, beat him viciously and dragged him away.

A Palestinian official initially said that Mr. Banat's health had "deteriorated" during his arrest, and Justice Minister Muhammad al-Shalal deh said last Wednesday that Mr. Banat had suffered an "unnatural" death.

European and other diplomats who met with Majed Faraj, the Palestinian General Intelligence chief, last Wednesday said they had been told Mr. Banat's killing was an accident.

The uproar over the killing eerily echoed the 2018 death of Mr. Khashoggi, an outspoken Saudi columnist whose criticisms of Saudi Arabia had angered its crown prince. A Saudi hit squad killed Mr. Khashoggi and the kingdom sought unsuccessfully to cover it up.

Gen. Talal Dweikat, the spokesman for Palestinian security forces, said Friday that 14 people had been referred to the military justice system and that investigations into Mr. Banat's death would continue.

Reports of arbitrary arrest and torture by the authority have been rife for years, and Mr. Banat was not the first to die.

After a Hamas supporter, Haitham Amro, died in the custody of the General Intelligence Service in 2009, an autopsy determined torture was the cause. Five intelligence officers were charged but a military court acquitted them.

The courts too have been severely weakened by Mr. Abbas, who, surrounded by a coterie of aides, has been ruling by decree since 2007, when he dissolved the Palestinian legislature after Hamas's victory in general elections and its subsequent takeover of Gaza.

Decrees over the last two years have enabled Mr. Abbas's office to wield more influence over the courts, according to Palestinian legal professionals. Several noncompliant judges have been fired.

Ahmad al-Ashqar, a constitutional law professor and lawyer who had served as a judge since 2011, was forcibly retired by Mr. Abbas in January, he said, after he had openly opposed the president's appointment of a transitional judicial council to replace the previous council, a high-level body that supervises the judiciary.

"Today there is no independent court, as an institution," he said. "The judges are afraid of having what happened to me happen to them."

The authority has also clamped down on nongovernment groups, requiring them to submit their plans for research and activities and their estimated budgets.



A protester is seized in Ramallah last month by people thought to be plainclothes Palestinian security officers.

And an electronic crimes law from 2018 has been used to undermine freedom of speech and information, human rights advocates say. It allows the authority to block websites that could “threaten national security, public order or public morals,” and has been used to shut sites of political opponents.

Mr. Shikaki, the pollster, said his group had found it increasingly difficult to publish results in the Palestinian news media. When he refused to comply with the new regulations, he said, the group’s bank accounts were frozen.

A June poll by his group found that 84 percent of Palestinians believe the authority is tainted with corruption, and many complain about mismanagement and nepotism.

In one example, Muatasem Muhaisen, the son of a top official of Mr. Abbas’s Fatah party, was appointed to a senior Health Ministry position even after he had been accused of assaulting a Ramallah hospital director.

In March, the authority siphoned some of the few Covid vaccines in its possession and distributed them to the senior ranks of the ruling party, allies in the media and even relatives of top dignitaries, according to Palestinian officials.

Some Palestinians said the authority, working from an old Middle East playbook framed around security, was confronting a new, educated and social media-savvy generation of Palestinians.

“Today is not the 1980s or 90s,” said Shawan Jabarin, director of Al Haq, a Palestinian human rights organization. “With the new media, you cannot hide your actions.”

The United States, which has financed, trained and equipped the Palestinian security forces over the years, said it was “deeply disturbed” by Mr. Banat’s death, adding in a statement, “We have serious concerns about Palestinian Authority restrictions on the exercise of freedom of expression by Palestinians and harassment of civil society activists and organizations.”

American security assistance, severed during the Trump administration, was resumed in April. A U.S. Embassy spokeswoman said the aid was intended “to assist in the development of credible institutions of governance” and strengthen Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation.

The anti-authority protests, which have extended into this week, have put pressure on Mr. Abbas to respond to the death of Mr. Banat but few Palestinians expect any major imminent changes.

“What they did over the last days has scared people and intimidated them,” said Shatha Hammad, 32, a Palestinian journalist for the news site Middle East Eye who was injured and had her cellphone smashed in a protest.

General Dweikat, the security forces spokesman, denied that any plainclothes officers had attacked protesters, insisting that the assailants were just civilian counterprotesters who had feared “a huge assault on the political system.” He denied knowledge of cellphone confiscations or arrests over Facebook postings. “Our position is that we don’t arrest anyone for their speech,” he said.



Members of the Palestinian Authority security forces blocking a road in Ramallah on Saturday.

A young Palestinian builder who recently spent 10 days in a Palestinian jail in Jericho disagreed. He said he had been arrested over an oblique insult aimed at the authority that he had posted on Facebook.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution, he said he had been roughed up and humiliated during daily interrogations.

All he wants, he said, were elections and the ability to speak freely.

As a teenager, the builder said, he had spent 30 months in Israeli prisons for throwing stones at soldiers.

“They have rules,” he said of the Israelis. “There’s a law, a system. There’s no law in the authority.”