

Political Participation of Palestinian Youth: Problems and Challenges

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Youth within Palestinian society

Introduction

Any attempt to identify the increasing challenges that young Palestinians face today must refute the Israeli challenge, - not because it is irrelevant, it is in fact a central factor –, and reflect on the current policies and the available resources properly.

The challenges Palestinian youth face today may be categorized into those that are related to daily life such as unemployment and high living expenses, and those which are associated with the Palestinian political sphere such as the lack of their participation in policy making processes and at decision-making levels.

Despite the constant attempts of various social, political, organizational and academic sectors to combat these challenges, the researcher believes that they have not been able to achieve the level required, and this is due to several reasons, including but not limited to either diagnosing the problems on the surface level, or provide partial solutions to the challenges.

These challenges must be tackled within a regulatory framework that is capable of providing solutions and making policies to bridge the gaps between theoretical and practical processes; which is what this paper aims to accomplish.

Palestinian Youth: Accomplishments

There have been multiple and various achievements for Palestinian youth either on the national resistance level or on the institutional democratic level. On the national resistance level, Palestinian youth have played a leading role in the Palestinian society since the Nakba in 1948, and contributed effectively in the establishment of the Palestinian National Movement's vision. In this context, youth became the leaders of Palestinian organizations of different leftist, Islamic, and national mandates. Moreover, prisons were also a national stronghold controlled by Palestinian youth.

On the institutional democratic level, however, the General Union of Palestinian Students, which was one of the most significant unions and national institutions, was established in the 50s, aiming at bringing together Palestinian students and youth to promote their national and patriotic identities rather than handling students' issues. Therefore, the Union became afterwards a representative of Palestinian youth in International and Arabic forums.

This was followed by enhancement in the role of youth in Palestinian universities and colleges, as these were platforms for social activity and movement that started emerging in the late 70s. In addition to organizing national activities and strikes against the Israeli occupation, student movements and councils have organized fairs, festivals and led national action in all its forms.

The role of the Palestinian youth was not only limited to the beginning, it has always been capable of restoring order. In fact, when the role of the Palestinian National Movement declined, Palestinian youth led the first Palestinian Intifada; in effect, it was a symbol and a method that can never be repeated.

Impact of Politics on Student Movements' Role

In any case, student movements in the Palestinian universities cannot be detached from politics as they are closely related to the surrounding political circumstances and affairs. Besides, it is highly unlikely for a student movement in a university under occupation not to participate in political spheres, hence, universities have always been an open space for Palestinian factions to present their political ideologies and visions, as well as to attract youth due to their significant role.

Moreover, one cannot ignore that these movements are highly affected by policies of the political parties, to which they are affiliated, and are, consequently, projecting the visions of these parties specifically on universities' elections, such as what happened upon the Oslo Accords, where the Palestine Liberation Organization factions were replaced by the Islamic movements. In addition, the Palestinian division that took place in 2007 resulted in many effects represented in the refusal of Islamic movements from participating in elections and the disruption of elections within universities of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Palestinian Youth: Challenges

Challenges that face Palestinian youth intertwine and overlap on three main levels: cultural stereotyping, Ideologies, and institutional behavior. This interference becomes more complex over time, due to the fact that the Palestinian political and social life is forcibly affected by environmental and universal variables while holding the same issues from the past, which doubles the present and future's problems. This can be noticed in the international youth revolution that was accompanied by the emergence of globalization, social media, and overall development.

The lack of Palestinian Youth Participation at the Decision-Making Level:

Despite the fact that youth represent a high percentage of the Palestinian society, their representation level within parliament is quite low. Besides, there is no direct legislation that regulates the effective role of youth in society or a regular legislative body that establishes effective communication channels to bridge the gaps amongst youth and decision makers.

In the public sector, youth participation is limited to lower-level jobs in ministries, security systems, and official institutions; they are absent from any leading centers. As a matter of fact, the biggest challenge that Palestinian youth still face is excluding their role on receiving and executing orders without participating in decision making processes within the political sphere.

Overall, it can be said that the Palestinian youth suffered from several challenges that have affected their role in political decision making. These challenges can be categorized in two parts: Classic challenges and Emerging challenges.

Classic Challenges:

Socio-cultural challenges that affect political life. Therefore, the Arabic paradigm for managing political life has emerged, based on the aspects of patriarchy, the parish, and other minor dimensions that constitute from those two.

First: The Arab Cultural Mindset

The Palestinian community is part of the Arab community and, thus, holds some of its cultural values. However, given the fact that Palestine is still under occupation, its social, economic, and political life differ from those of other Arab countries. However, simulation of the Arabic

mindset is still totally present; as dominant leaderships are old-aged, and believe that only they possess the wisdom to handle different cases. Therefore, they did not invest in youth to enable them of holding decision making positions.

Second: The Management Method of the Palestinian Liberation Organization

The quota system is adopted by the Palestinian Liberation Organization and mainly seeks to eliminate partisan democracy in the organization and keep the same leadership, which has led to total absence of Palestinian youth from political leading positions. In addition, studies affirm that since the National Council's last session, approximately one hundred members have died of old age, which is considered as one of the most serious issues within the organization besides the lack of new ways that enhance the participation of youth in decision making processes.

Third: Secrecy and the Palestinian Resistance

Resistance, in all its forms, was always led by energetic young Palestinians, whereas now, it seems certain individuals, with historical backgrounds, have been holding the same leading positions for too long.

Fourth: Absence of Democracy in Palestinian Parties

This absence of democratic systems within Palestinian parties is attributed to subjective and objective reasons such as geographical diversity of internal and external organizational bodies, the secret work of Palestinian parties, absence of a coherent organizational structure, and the lack of annual elections. These reasons have resulted in partisan leaders who are aged over 70, and having the parties adopt bureaucratic systems rather than democratic ones.

Non-Classic or Emerging Problems

First: The patriarchic nature of the Palestinian Authority's political system. The first Palestinian Authority leadership was controlled by patriarchal leaders who came from the exile and held high positions and within political parties. In addition, associations of the Palestinian civil society were controlled by traditional partisan leadership that has been expanding. However, the irregularity of elections was a major reason for lack of Palestinian youth participation. For example, over the course of 25 years, the parliamentary elections were only held twice on

Palestinian land since the emergence of the Palestinian Authority, which indicates that many generations of young Palestinians never participated in democratic processes, since they no longer exist.

Second: One major emerging factor that contributed to the decline of Palestinian youth political participation was the structural political, economic, and social changes in the Palestinian community; which applies to various levels:

Political Level:

- **Systems' Legitimacy:** shifting from revolutionary legitimacy to institutional legitimacy has placed great pressure upon Palestinian youth, as they were never engaged in the revolutionary legitimacy, and when they seek to hold leading roles, they are rejected by being confronted by the revolutionary legitimacy. Therefore, the absence of partisan and political activity resulted in excluding legitimacy to the historical resistant background of leaders.

- **The absence of partisan role:** partisan role can be divided into 4 main factors depending on Palestinian Parties:

1. Fateh: the absence of organizational work on the expense of emerging within the Palestinian Authority
2. Hamas: clashes with the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian authority affected youth and leadership recruitment, hence, the democratic process.
3. Leftist factions: organizational weakness due to subjective and objective factors that contributed to the decline in youth political participation, especially after the political and geographic division, as well as the disruption of union elections in institutions, colleges, and universities.
4. Independents and others: struggled from Hamas and Fateh control as well as the absence of democracy and elections and its emergence on the hands of older generations. Independency has become a separated democratic partisan dimension itself.

The politically unfulfilling technocracy: Universities are young Palestinians' haven, but student movements regressed after being the leaders of political work and the from university

campuses, as they started focusing only on union work and ensuring that they achieve academic excellence without engaging in political activity. Some student movements have even lost their influence on universities' students.

Political Split: the political split has led to a total absence of political participation of Palestinian youth, and strengthening the power of leaders in parties. Moreover, in order to avoid the criticism of the other, parties resorted to blind defense, monopolizing power to first-level leaders, and eliminating democracy within parties' internal policies in favor of the split.

Transformation in the Palestinian Political Culture: Following the emergence of the Palestinian Authority, following the Oslo Accords in particular, the struggle between supporters of the political process and supporters of resistance tensed, to the extent that both have sought to prove the uselessness of the political process in eliminating occupation. Amidst the struggle between supports, the Palestinian political culture indicated that Palestinians have failed in negotiations, which resulted in shifting Palestinian youth away from political work and exposing them to a state of denial.

Economic Level: the recent years have been economically the toughest on Palestinian youth; unemployment was very prominent among graduates due to lack of congruence between them and the Palestine labor market and sometimes due to weakness in the local market. In addition to the high living costs that have limited young Palestinians from participating in political life and decision making processes; youth had to focus on essential life aspects rather than political ones, such as the dilemma of marriage among these economic challenges.

The most important issue in today's emerging challenges is the Palestinian society's inability to accommodate to the nature of the neoliberal economy; as the society has become a victim of the official authority and large corporations that do not mobilize national issues as their core task, and whom young Palestinians rely on.

These challenges have resulted in the lack of youth participation in leading the Palestinian political life, and this subsequently has led to characterizing the youth sectors with:

1. Political Apathy
2. Weak political awareness

3. Engaging in daily life matters
4. Total rejection of the methodology and determinants of politics and lack of trust in public policies.

Recommendations:

This paper suggests a group of initiatives, which, if implemented, might contribute in reviving the role of youth, as well as enhancing the democratic practices within the political system and the effectiveness of associations. These initiatives include:

1. Raising the political and leadership awareness of Palestinian youth, through non-traditional educative programs by the associations of civil society and Palestinian universities.
2. Leadership empowerment trainings for youth on unitary work and enabling them of using empowerment tools through networking, establishing platforms, etc.
3. Launching an advocacy campaign on social media platforms to address the challenges that face youth, while hosting political decision makers at the same time.
4. Creating a young committee that is responsible for discussing the issues Palestinian youth face through addressing these issues, developing communication capacities and conducting regular meeting with decision makers.