

Political Participation of Palestinian Youth: Student Movements

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Introduction:

Youth participation in social and political life is an evidence of the society's progress; the wider the participation the greater the prosperity in various political, cultural, economic, social and other fields. The improvement that youth achieves, especially students, generates from continuous scientific knowledge they acquire in schools, as well as their increasing familiarity and accessibility to different technological innovations. One can also say that this is another result of them being able to participate in political spheres at universities, as it is the perfect place for students to recognize and practice their political rights by affiliating to different student parties. Universities may also be the place where students engage in the student council's elections, and do community work, which results in developing their sense of belonging and loyalty to Palestine, understanding of democracy, and respecting the different opinions of others.

Political Participation

Political participation means to engage in political work, affect and be influenced by the decision making processes, work with different parties and individuals in order to become satisfied with governmental or partisan work; whether it is by expressing an opinion in a public matter, joining a party, a civil society association, or a governmental body.

Student Movements:

Student movements are groups of youth established in universities to meet students' academic needs such as rejecting the commodification of education, and demanding better education conditions. In addition, student movements have been playing an essential political role where it aims to attract as many students as possible to

participate in student movements by voicing the agendas of each party, and publishing information on the Palestinian cause.

It is important to point out that what distinguishes the Palestinian student movements from its international counterparts is the fact that it has been considered the youth cornerstone of Palestinian parties and factions since it is ideologically connected to them.

Youth:

According to the United Nations 'youth' are those aged between 15 - 25. However, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry, youth belong to the age group (18-35).

Between the Past and the Present:

Although youth were present in the Palestinian revolutionary history, their role in making vital decisions was restricted at a time when they were the fuel that enflames the revolution against occupation. This has led to narrowing their political role on instigating people towards revolution. For example, youth were the first to notice the dangerous repercussions of the Zionist movement on Palestine, and to call for resisting the British mandate through speeches and holding students conferences. Correspondingly, students constituted the essence of the Palestinian parties during the British mandate, who later on became a vital part of the military organization against Israeli occupation. The first bastion for Palestinians after the Nakba of 1948 was the Palestinian Students Association, which was developed by Palestinian youth in 1944 in Egypt and became a shelter for Palestinian refugees. This shelter, which defended the Palestinian national identity and contribute to widening the recognition of the Palestinian cause in international forums, especially after attending the Youth Conference in Warsaw with the Egyptians in 1954, and when the Palestinian Students joined the International Student Union in 1955.

However, during the Israeli occupation, youth's role was more prominent as meetings behind Israeli prison bars and within Palestinian universities with students who studied

abroad provided them with an enhanced awareness and an advanced expertise. Youth also were the driving force of patriotic work in the first Intifada in 1987 as its concepts spread among Palestinians via universities. Therefore, students became the most qualified group to lead with the experience they acquired from university partisan work.

On the other hand, upon the return of the Palestinian Authority to their homeland in 1994, youth did not have any role in institutions, parties, or in decision making positions because of the dominance of certain groups on the internal policies and procedures of the PLO.

Factors that Affect Political Participation of Youth

There are many subjective and objective factors that affect the political participation of youth; on the one hand, subjective ones are linked to university students, in the sense that students had previously gained awareness from participating in political seminars, and educative campaigns issued by student parties, but nowadays their interest shifted from political to scientific, social and leisure matters. On the other hand, objective factors could be associated with the internal policies and procedures of the political party, to which student movements affiliate to, political regulations, universities' rules, or family pressure; such as:

- Irregular elections of internal student councils elections in Palestinian universities.
- Student movement's inability to meet union political needs of students.
- Limited freedom of speech and participation in organizational work; particularly Fateh activists in Gaza and Hamas activists in the West Bank.
- Control of certain individuals or groups over political parties, which hinders the ability of youth to hold leading roles in political parties.
- Financial control of political parties over student movements.

- Societal awareness: for instance, parents fear their children's engagement in parties' organized activities might expose them to being arrested by occupation or security forces in Gaza and West Bank.
- University regulations that limit or ban some student activities.

International Examples on Youth Political Participation:

Malaysia: a parliament for youth that discusses issues of concern for youth and society through having distributed committees that nominate and suggest several issues to the parliament.

Europe: a 33-year-old Swedish Health minister, who served as a Minister from 2014 to 2017 and was a member of the Swedish Social Democratic Party.

Signs of youth/students political participation regression:

There are many signs that manifest the decline of the political participation of youth, particularly students:

- Lack of student's political vision
- Emergence of student groups that focus on non-political, leisure activities
- Declining number of participants in students council elections
- Student refusal in joining student movements
- Lack of interest in activities led by student movements

Success and Failure Stories:

- A youth group succeeded in mobilizing a large number of citizens and foreign solidarity activists and started marches on all bypass roads and blocked the way before settlers in 2012.
- Fateh convinced Sweden to recognize Palestine as a state through the relationship between its student movement (Shabiba) and the Swedish Social party.
- Inability to initiate a movement against fighting corruption.

- Inability to create a unified political/union stand.
- Inability to end the internal split; despite minor efforts and initiatives that called for combating it.
- Students' lack of interest to work on public issues; corruption in particular.

Student Political Participation in an Open Media Platform

The technological revolution had an effective role in changing the means of political participation and finding alternative ways for youth to voice out their opinions. While historical leaders used to attract their audiences through speeches and television interviews, social media platforms, nowadays, enable youth to protest and bring different issues to the surface. They managed to takeover these new platforms because the lack of knowledge and interest of the older generations in these platforms.

Generally, youth have created a forum for themselves in the virtual world, but in a way could not create one in the real world. On a partisan level, however, political parties have used these media platforms to shed light on the mistakes of others, which has contributed in raising the political conflicts between Fateh and Hamas. Any follower of the March of Return in Gaza is aware that youth are the real pillars of either armed or peaceful revolutions. Hence, the revolutions against the governing regimes, which the Arab world has witnessed in the last decade, are a proof that youth are the mobilisers for social, political, and cultural change in society.

Recommendations:

- Uniting union efforts to restore the students' interest in student movements.
- Attempting to understand and meet students' needs and interests.
- Launching student-attracting activities, and raising political awareness among students on the importance of students' participation in the political field; this can be achieved through using new electronic media tools.

Concluding Remarks

Youth have unlimited and great potentials, but accomplishing results requires uniting the efforts towards developing a clear plan to fulfill one goal; whether that goal is to reach decision making levels or to promote society on the cultural, political social and economic level.

Some may perceive that the engagement of student movements in political work is exaggeration. However, this engagement was the result of the absence of official platforms where young students can exercise their political rights. Holding periodic municipal, legislative and presidential elections irregularly is part of the obstacles that hinders youth from participating effectively in political life.