

Palestinian Democracy

Examining Barriers to Democratic Transition and How to Overcome Them

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the Palestinian national movement, the Palestinians have never had a space free of external infringement on their right to practice democracy, from the British Mandate to the Israeli occupation. There have always been powers or measures restricting their democratic expression. Yet, despite these circumstances, Palestinians are still trying to regain their political agency.

After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinian democracy witnessed an important development, with the first Palestinian elections held in 1996, only to suffer a major setback with the division after the 2006 elections. And ever since, the Palestinians have been suffering the repercussions of division.

According to the Economist Intelligence's Global Democracy Index, the Palestinian democracy in 2006 scored 6.01 points and declined to 3.94 in 2021, due to the absence of general elections. Likewise, student council, union, and local elections are not being held on a regular basis in the West Bank and not held at all in the Gaza Strip.

This paper discusses the internal and external factors hindering democratic transformation in Palestine and presents a set of proposals to address the obstacles and challenges that stand in the way of the Palestinian democratization.

Obstacles to Democracy in Palestine

Israeli occupation

The most prominent obstacle to the Palestinian democratic transition is the continuation of the Israeli occupation. Israel has no interest in the establishment of a stable Palestinian democratic political system. It, therefore, works to tear apart the unity of Palestinian society, distort its economic structures, and prevent the establishment of an independent state.¹ The transitional period, during which Palestine should be able to establish an independent state, has been going on for thirty years, instead of five (according to the Oslo Accords) due to Israel's disavow of the peace process.

¹ Ayoub, Hasan, **Beyond the Democratic Transition in the Palestinian Political System**. Unpublished Master's.

Exploiting its control over the movement of the Palestinians across the Palestinian territories, Israel's restrictive measures represent the biggest obstacle to democratic transformation, especially the electoral process.

Israel directly obstructed the electoral process in the first legislative elections in 2006 by closing voter registration centers, preventing election committee staff from working in Jerusalem, arresting a number of them, and imposing curfews in some areas. It reinstated the same policy after the Palestinian Authority announced its intentions to hold the general elections in 2021. This prompted the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to postpone the elections.

Today, Israel is pursuing a policy of de facto annexation of large parts of the West Bank, and the result is the entrenchment of a “one-state reality of unequal rights”.

Palestinian division

The political division between Fatah and Hamas hindered the democratic transition in Palestine. The second legislative elections in 2006 resulted in two parallel forces and the conflict between the two parties escalated from political, intellectual, and programmatic differences to an armed conflict. However, the Palestinian parties support elections but obstruct their holding, and resort to selective, non-periodic elections, at the level of trade unions or municipalities, which means choosing party interests over the overall interest of the Palestinians.² Meanwhile, Palestinians are deprived of a free space, where they can exercise elections and authorize the ballot box to end the division by democratic means.³

Cultural heritage and societal structure

The Palestinian society is similar to other Arab societies in terms of the cultural heritage and social structures, which in their contemporary history have been subject to a wide range of obstacles that have limited their development, most notably colonization, repressive political regimes, and poor development efforts. Moreover, the Palestinian national movement has always suffered divisions, as its leaders were never able to agree on a political and economic program.

² PalThink. 2023. Round Table Discussion on Democracy Barriers in Palestine (March 1).

³ Alhouroub, Khaled: «**Engineering**» **Palestinian Elections**, Palestinian Center for Policy Research and Strategic Studies - Masarat, Ramallah, Palestine, 2013, available <http://bit.ly/3YvpMxz>

Other social barriers to democracy include the lack of democratic upbringing, the fact that the system of values of the society does not incite democracy, and the difficult economic conditions such as widespread poverty, unemployment, and low food security.

Political system structure distortion

The Palestinian institutions are fragile due to the absence of democratic practice and the continued division. Likewise, the duality of official institutions between the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian Liberation Organization created a fragile political system that is unable to overcome the obstacles and challenges facing Palestine.

Civil society weakness

Palestinian civil society—whether in its broad definition, which includes political and social parties and movements, or in its narrow definition, which is limited to civil institutions—is severely weak due to the control of historical forces, such as political parties, over the decision-making of war and peace. Civil society in Gaza and the West Bank has lost the ability to influence decision-making and push Palestinian parties to resort to the ballot box as a means of resolving intractable differences.⁴

External factors disrupting the democratic transition

Since the emergence of the Palestinian political system, many factors affected its shape and course. Although this is not exclusive to the Palestinian case, but external factors have affected the course of the Palestinian cause more than usual.

Arab and regional powers

Democratic transition suffered from regional interventions that tried to use the Palestinian democracy to serve their national interests and regional status through financial support and political influence. Regional actors interfere in the Palestinian democratization process for two goals: ensuring the survival of the

⁽⁴⁾ Abu Odeh, Conclusion: (Intervention) **Within a round table**, Gaza Palestine, 1 March 2023,

regimes of these actors and securing regional geopolitical interests.⁵ If elections are held, some countries in the region support Palestinian parties running for elections, so that the results of the democratic process are close to their national goals.

United States

Since the establishment of the PA, the US has supported a democratic transition as the main sponsor of the political settlement process and expressed its position with a set of political and economic conditions and pressures. However, it neglected the political and partisan environment necessary for democratic transition.⁶

With the gradual cessation of the political settlement process, the American role in supporting democracy in Palestine began to decline, which coincided with internal developments in the Palestinian society including the internal dilemma of whether to prioritize the liberation movement or the establishment of the state, on the one hand, and the accompanying escalation of violence, which hindered the emergence of a stable political system capable of bringing about transformation, on the other.

European Union

The EU has always linked its assistance to developing countries to their commitment to human rights and progress in the democratic process, which pushed many countries to improve the conditions of human rights, public freedoms, and democratic practice. The EU's statements and positions have always supported the democratic process in Palestine, but its policies indicate that it prioritizes security and stability over democracy, especially in light of the rapid international political and economic changes, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war and the influx of migrants to Europe.

Policy recommendations to address obstacles and challenges to democratic practice

Conducting elections

⁵ Fekry, Marwa. 2019. *Authoritarian Regional Powers and Containing Democratic Transition: Saudi Arabia and Russia*; Siyasat Arabiya.

⁶ Ahmed, Khamis, and Mahmoud, Hasna: **Switch to Democracy: Obstacles and the Process of Transition to a Democratic System in the Arab World**, Arab Democratic Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Berlin 2020.

If the Palestinian leadership is betting on the state-building project, it needs to renew the legitimacy of its institutions through elections and democratize the public sphere. This requires working on holding regular and periodic student and union elections and local bodies as preliminary steps for holding general elections and proving the strength of the Palestinian will.

Democratic upbringing

Democratic upbringing in any society is an important requirement for democratic transition because the existence of democracy and the integration of its components depends on the extent to which democratic values are rooted in the minds and consciences of its members.⁷ Without Democratic upbringing and the practice of democracy on all levels, it will remain a mere tool rather than a societal culture.

Resorting to the international community

The general elections in 2021 were postponed until the conditions in all Palestinian territories, foremost of which is Jerusalem, are improved, in accordance with the provisions of the law. However, the Palestinian leadership and the parties that agreed to hold it have not worked to overcome the obstacles that stand in their way. This requires turning to the international community to pressure Israel to allow the Palestinian people to practice democracy.

Neutralization of external obstacles

International and regional tensions impede the Palestinian democracy, as Fatah and Hamas have stated several times during reconciliation talks and agreed to neutralize international pressures and interventions. However, international obstructions still persist.

⁷ Human Rights and Democracy Media Center "SHAMS", Al-Quds University Abu Dis. **Workshop entitled "Democratization"**, 21 December 2014. <https://bit.ly/3nPEgvi>