

Abstract

The Palestinian Authority came into existence based on the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO. This interim solution was supposed to be in place for the five years between 1994 and 1999, i.e. the period under study in this thesis. Although it might be considered premature to study a political system still in the process of being constructed, there are numerous political systems in the neighboring countries, which can be compared with the new Palestinian system-in-the-making. Therefore, it seems justified to embark on such a study and analyze the history and politics of the Palestinian Authority (P.A.) based on a particular theoretical approach.

The argument advanced in this thesis is based on the assumption that this new Palestinian system-in-the-making can only be studied meaningfully in the context of international relations. The approach chosen in this study therefore is a combination of Rentier-State theory and the Neopatrimonialism Paradigm. Only in this way was it possible to adequately analyze the external pressure exerted on the Palestinians, which resulted in a whole array of internal reactions, in the context of which the new Palestinian system began to crystallize.

This new system shows all the features of an authoritarian system, however in a very particular form, which can best be conceptualized as a neopatrimonial rentier-system.

The system is highly centralized, the Executive dominates the system, both politically and economically, but at the same time the Executive relies to a high degree on constant legitimization from Palestinian society. One way used to achieve this high degree of legitimacy is patronage, not least in public sector employment, where we find both, highly professional people as well as employees who occupy their positions based exclusively on patronage.

Donor money from abroad, conceptionalized in this thesis as political rents, has played and continues to play a crucial role in the building of the Palestinian Authority and the new political system-in-the-making. Donor money as political rents has tried to force the P.A. to act as a policeman inside Palestinian society with the goal of controlling any opposition against the particular form of peace process embarked upon in Oslo in 1993. This can be demonstrated best in the financing and training of the Palestinian police force and security apparatuses by major donor countries.

In this context, little was done to build the beginnings of a productive national economy. On the other hand, the continued dependence of the Palestinian economy on the Israeli one, was supposed to be a first step in the building of a New Middle East as conceived by Shimon Peres, and to be integrated into the overall global market.

Throughout its occupation of Palestine Israel has succeeded in preventing any meaningful development in the productive sectors, above all industry. Also, it has done all it could to hinder any attempted development of a Palestinian private sector. Instead, it has "de-developed" the Palestinian economy and made it totally dependent on the Israeli one.

In this context, an authoritarian Palestinian political system was considered the most appropriate one by the major donor countries and by Israel to take over after the partial and very limited Israeli redeployment in the Occupied Territories. The P.A. was supposed to enforce the law (of Israel), to fight "terrorism" and to crack the infrastructure of the opposition movements, above all the Islamic movements.

The special form of authoritarian system, which suited these tasks best was the neopatrimonial system, with a strong central leader, legitimized by elections as well as by other forms of more traditional legitimacy. This leadership also had to control the economy as tightly as possible, in order to have the necessary resources to guarantee the continued existence of its power and of the system as a whole. At the same time, the neopatrimonial system is best capable of balancing out against each other all the forces of the opposition, thereby preventing any strengthening on the part of any special group from within the opposition.

The Palestinian system is a highly centralized system, with one man monopolizing the control over politics, above all over foreign affairs. The system is based above all on personal relations with very little in terms of institutionalizations. The elite is unwilling to allow any challengers from below to enter the political arena. The main reason this system has been able to persist despite all difficulties is the fact, that large amounts of political rents are available and flow in a continuous stream directly to the authority.

Despite all this, the particular system in Palestine has shown tremendous difficulties in withstanding the pressures exerted by both Israel and the donor countries in the absence of a Peace proposal acceptable to Palestinians. In the continued absence of such an acceptable proposal, the P.A. has to follow the Palestinian street in order to keep its legitimacy, thus entering a direct confrontation with both Israel and to a lesser degree with the donor countries (more with the U.S. than with Europe). It is the display of these contradictions through which the P.A. is passing, which has determined the Intifada in the months since September 2000. Still, it is argued in this thesis, that also after the Intifada, never mind how it will end, the neopatrimonial rentier-system will continue to dominate the Palestinian political field.