

Abstract

Despite the fact that a change has taken place in Palestinian society since the arrival of the Palestinian National Authority numerous obstacles still face the Palestinian people as they work to build a democratic Palestinian civil society. The peace accords signed with Israel in part determine the nature of the political relationships that prevail within Palestinian society. These relationships are also affected by the passive exercise of authority (as a concept), an oligarchic regime, suppression of voices of dissent, absence of political pluralism and regular governmental elections, dependency on familial or tribal relations to gain political support, underdeveloped economic and political infrastructures, and the political heritage inherited from the PLO and more pragmatic groups. All of these factors have played key roles in impeding the establishment of a democratic civil society based in the legal statehood of the authority, transparency and accountability.

This study comes seven years after the establishment of the PNA and at a time when Zionist extremism against Palestinians, both as individuals and an authority, is increasing. This is also a time at which the peace process has become mired in deadlock and hopes for its future look grim. Under these conditions, the Palestinian people have found their land divided into cantons and their civil society institutions facing new and old challenges at the same time. The tasks of building a democratic civil society cannot be separated from the liberation struggle, despite the temporary calm that prevailed in the Palestinian arena during the Oslo period.

This aim of this study is to examine the status of Palestinian democracy. It attempts to shed light on the different elements that make up Palestinian civil society, examines the processes of the PNA, and explores the conditions that regulate both the PNA's interactions with and view of Palestinian civil society organizations. It also aims at examining the extent to which Palestinian civil society institutions and the institutions of the PNA adhere to the mission statements they have adopted. This study specifically targets political parties (both opposition parties and those supporting the Oslo Peace Accords), unions and federations, other civil society institutions, ministries, and the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Anyone tracing the history of the PNA-civil society relationship will realize that during the past seven years the PNA has acted as if there were not any civil society institutions. Laws regulating the PNA and these institutions have not been enforced and the PNA has acted as if the occupation has come to a complete end. The Authority has also given itself the power to oppress civil society institutions. Usually the relationship that prevails between the PNA and such organizations is one that is pragmatic, but filled with entitlement and confrontation. Furthermore, the PNA has made no effort to divide its powers.

Most Palestinian political factions are neither influential on the PNA, nor are they able to perform their own roles effectively. These faults can in part be ascribed to the absence of regular leadership elections.

Popular and professional federations are fettered to the Palestinian National Authority and often complain about the absence of the rule of law. In addition, there is a dispute between the Palestinian federations inside Palestine and Palestinian federations abroad over which federations should be used to determine the terms of reference used in laying out ground rules for working to the others.

Palestinian NGOs are normally considered to be one of the most active Palestinian civil society institutions. They maintain close relationships with the Palestinian Legislative Council and international organizations, but suffer from weaknesses related to democratic practices in their internal structure and voluntary work. They also often rely on foreign funds and are not self-sustaining.

The Palestinian Legislative Council is usually considered the key civil society institution. However, the executive branch dominates it with respect to its decisions and members. The term of the present council has also expired, but no new elections have been held. Such facts have caused people to lose faith in the council.

Concerning civil society institutions, this study exposes their remoteness from actual democratic practices, their neglect of their target group, and the weak contribution that they have made in building a strong civil society.

The study concludes by showing that there is still a large gap between the reality of the relationship that currently exists between Palestinian society and civil society institutions, and the relationship that needs to be developed by future civil society institutions.