



# NEOPATRIMONIALISM, CORRUPTION, AND THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY: PATHWAYS TO REAL REFORM

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Palestinians recently ranked corruption as the second largest problem after the economic crisis – higher than the Israeli occupation. Palestinians generally view Palestinian Authority (PA) officials as a self-serving, elitist group disconnected from the Palestinian struggle and the people’s daily suffering. Despite this dissatisfaction, there has been little change. What remains are the “old guards” maintaining a grip on power, rampant and systemic corruption, and the alienation of Palestinians from participation in decisions that impact their lives and future.

The present reality of the PA in no way resembles the kind of Palestinian government promised in the heady years of the Oslo Accords. This discrepancy between envisaged democratic leadership and reality can be explained in part by the neopatrimonial nature of the Palestinian political system – a hybrid model in which state structures, laws, and regulations are formally in place but are overridden by informal politics and networks of patronage, kinship, and tribalism.

In an institutional context in which Palestinians have no mechanisms to hold their leaders accountable, Palestinian neopatrimonialism has created a situation impervious to change in leadership or political system.

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) has failed to act as the “sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.” The PLO’s weakness can be seen in the fact that its legislative arm, the Palestinian National Council, convened in May 2018 after 22 years of inaction. The absence demonstrates how the Palestinian leadership impeded the PLO from fulfilling its duty as a representative of all Palestinians.

The PA, on the other hand, has overstepped its role as an interim government, and has increasingly become an authoritarian governing force in the West Bank. Hamas has followed suit in suppressing political dissent in the Gaza Strip.

As a result of Fatah’s control of the PA and the PLO, the administrative and political machines run on dynamics of inclusion vs. exclusion and reward vs. punishment – fundamentally, according to loyalty.

The Palestinian leadership dominates negotiations and signs secret agreements. The Oslo Accords are a prime example of how the PLO executive monopolized negotiations with Israel and took decisions in the name of the Palestinian people that proved disastrous. The PA’s clandestine signing of agreements with Israel on matters related to energy, electricity, water, and communications demonstrates how far the leadership will go in ignoring formal processes and consultation with the public.

The PA’s reliance on foreign aid has also undermined the political system by making it accountable to international donors rather than Palestinians.

## **Policy recommendations:**

1. To break the monopoly of one group or party, there must be a healthy ecosystem of counterbalancing powers. Decentralization of power, through empowering grassroots and community leadership, is essential.
2. Palestinians must have vertical accountability that enables them to question their leaders and participate in decision making. They also need horizontal accountability, such as an independent parliament and independent audit organizations.
3. To restore the Palestinian public's trust in leadership, the impunity of the corrupt must be eliminated. This can only occur through solid anti-corruption laws and an independent judiciary that can hold the corrupt to account regardless of their political, financial, or social position.