

Youth, from the shadow of the scene to the heart of decision-making by Mariam.

Are youth absent, or are they being deliberately marginalized?!

Youth are not only the leaders of the future; they are partners in the current times. Good governance is not achieved by the sheer volume of laws, but it is rather attained through engagement of youth in the making (of good governance). That is to say, a state governed by the rule of law is built through a diversity of voices and elections rather than through competition for seats. Likewise, international conventions including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantee youth the right to political participation. Therefore, we do not demand privileges for you, but we call for the enforcement of the law.

In Palestine, political participation is not only viewed as a democratic right, but is taken as an act of survival. Here, land is being confiscated; the indigenous are being chained with restrictions; and life itself is being reshaped under the oppression of occupation...., the question of youth involvement in decision-making hubs becomes a question of justice, dignity, and the right to self-determination.

Youth comprise a significant proportion of the Palestinian society, with approximately 21% of the population in the age group 18–29 years. With almost 62% of the population aged below 30 years, the Palestinian society is undoubtedly considered a young society.

Youth are the most affected by the consequences of imposed policies, whether those made by the occupation or by internal imbalances within the matrix of governance... In their arms lies an inexhaustible energy capable of illuminating an entire country, and in their minds are unconventional ideas that protect the homeland from repeating the mistakes of ancestors and masters.

Nevertheless, their presence in decision-making circles remains limited, as if they are doomed to sacrifice on the battlegrounds with no seat on the decision-making table, or perhaps deliberately excluded. This contradiction cannot be justified in a context that claims to pursue liberation and the building of a state based on human rights.

The social and political participation of Palestinian youth is a natural extension of a historical struggle that has never ceased. Youth have never been outside the national action. They have been on the front lines of peaceful protest and popular initiatives. They have been defending the right to land and identity, documenting violations, and advocating for Palestinian causes in the global digital space. However, this presence in struggle arena is not adequately reflected within formal structures and decision-making centers, even though UN Security Council Resolution 1325 guarantees youth the right to political participation. When we speak of youth, it includes both males and females. Albeit the CEDAW Convention and the Security Council resolution stipulating the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, we are witnessing a serious crisis undermining the flow of the democratic process, namely the scarcity of women in decision-making positions.

From a legal perspective, the exclusion of youth and women from decision-making positions and negotiation tables constitutes a clear violation of the principles of participation and equality enshrined in international human rights charters, foremost among them the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs. A political system that respects human rights cannot be built while the group most affected is marginalized and denied the opportunity to influence pertinent policy making. It is truly unfortunate that decisions concerning and affecting the future of youth are made daily without even consulting them...

The Palestinian youth possess new tools of peaceful and legitimate resistance that goes beyond traditional forms of struggle. They are the most capable of utilizing digital media, international advocacy, and rights-based research towards constructing the Palestinian narrative in a language the world understands. Their presence in decision-making centers is necessary for proper policy making that is more aligned with international law as well as for courageously confronting attempts to drown the Palestinian narrative in the mist of falsehood.

Empowering youth politically also strengthens the inner resilience of the Palestinian society. A young person playing a genuine role in decision-making shall not feel victimized; on the contrary, such a person shall rather act as an active agent of change, even in such a complex exceptional reality. The emerging sense of effectiveness is one of the most important tools for addressing frustration, social fragmentation, and loss of trust in institutions, as well as for bridging the significant gap between the government and the youth. The older generation should help us build the bridge that makes our dreams come true by holding our hands, rather than crushing them underfoot; rather than confiscating opportunities into monopolies...

It is unconceivable to get into transitional justice or political reform without integrating youth at the heart of the process. They are the most daring in fighting corruption and the least chained by and knotted to traditional networks of interest. Youth are the most willing to redefine the relationship between authority and society based on rights rather than kinship and loyalties.

Nowadays, the real challenge facing the Palestinian national project does not only relate to confronting the occupation, but also to reformulating the national social contract based on participatory democracy bases, where youth are partners rather than instruments, and creators rather than mere doers. Palestine that we all aspire to restore cannot be built with a single mind, a single generation, or a single vision that beholds the future only through the lens of the past. There is no need to dissect the past or drift in a mirage without a map and without even mastering the art of navigation. As youth, we will not leave the oar to chance to determine our next direction; we ought to aim for success through re-engineering and structural change for the better.

Empowering Palestinian youth at decision-making levels is not merely a reformative step. It constitutes an act of peaceful resistance and an investment in justice. Youth empowerment is a guarantee for ensuring the continuousness of the Palestinian cause with a just discourse, coupled with the strength of its people, the research of its scholars, the pens of its writers, and the immense power of its youth.

Regardless of whether youth are marginalized or disengaged, we have to work on achieving the same goal. We must awaken youth and invest in their enlightenment if we truly intend to mark a new beginning, generate a more successful outcome, and build a more peaceful country.