

Palestinians push reform: Curbing corruption

by [J. Martin Bailey](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

Long before George W. Bush began calling for reform of the Palestinian National Authority (and for Yasir Arafat's ouster), a group of Palestinian lawmakers and researchers had outlined plans for creating a democratic society. The elected members of the Legislative Council, including Hanan Ashrawi, had been pressuring Arafat to accept their 1997 draft constitution, streamline his cabinet and set a date and procedures for new elections.

The Christians, Muslims and Jews with whom I spoke in June said that the badly needed reforms are already well defined. Most also insisted that the success of the reform strategies depends on an end to Israel's 35-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

"It is as though we are half-pregnant," Judeh Majaj, director of the East Jerusalem YMCA, said. "Our people want democracy. Palestinians have the potential to create the most democratic state in the Arab world. But we cannot accomplish it with checkpoints, daily humiliation, and helicopter gunships circling overhead. Until the occupation ends, there will be no successful delivery."

Many observers acknowledged the weakness and corruption of Arafat's government. "But Ariel Sharon has made him a hero," I was told. "Abu Ammar [the nickname of familiarity and respect used for Arafat] is our elected president, he is the symbol of Palestinian unity, and he is essential to peacemaking." Hanna Nasser, president of BirZeit University, said, "Abu Ammar is, in fact, the father of our country—our George Washington."

Most Palestinians, including Khalil Shikaki, a sociologist who heads the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, expect Arafat to retire or assume an honorary position after the state is formed. Shikaki's research organization recently found that 91 percent of Palestinians favor fundamental reform of the PNA.

The reform movement draws together some highly visible figures and some long-established human rights and research organizations located throughout the West Bank and Gaza. With modest financial support from the United Nations Development Program, a coordinating body has been created. The Coalition for Accountability and Integrity, known as AMAN, has announced a national plan to counter corruption.

Timothy Rothermel, a Dutchman who heads the UNDP, likes the “ground-up” character of the coalition’s efforts. The coalition is essentially interested in community-building, he said. The reformers’ plans are “developed through workshops. They’ve done a lot already—with one hand tied behind their backs.” He implied that the shackles are of both Sharon’s and Arafat’s making.

The coalition has been working at consensus-building for 18 months, he said. Its members are “more interested in creating a new society than they are in finger-pointing.” Rothermel will soon host a luncheon for international donors who are interested in supporting AMAN’s efforts.

One reason that finger-pointing is discouraged is that many observers recognize the difficult juggling act Arafat has had to perform. He is criticized by Israel and America for not suppressing Hamas and ending violent attacks. And he is criticized by some constituents, including Hamas members, for accepting Israeli and American direction, for “being the toy that the Israeli occupation plays with.” During the Oslo process, he was vilified for being more concerned with security for Israel than he was for jobs and dignity for Palestinians. According to Khaled Mashaal, head of the Hamas political wing, “Arafat has become a spokesman of the Israel enemy. He is interested only in what satisfies the Americans and Israelis. He doesn’t fulfill his duty of defending the Palestinian people.”

Legislative Council members, including Ashrawi, have been disturbed ever since the council’s efforts to combat corruption hit a dead end. Fifty-two cases of corruption involving misuse of public funds had been identified in a general audit. Ashrawi wants a systematic approach to reform, and her organization, the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), took the lead as early as 1997. MIFTAH was joined 18 months ago by the Arab Thought Forum, the Palestine Trade Center and the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy. All are located in Jerusalem and nearby Ramallah. Two Gaza-based organizations, the Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights and the Palestinian Council on Foreign Relations, also participate in the reform movement.

“We’re not looking for 100 percent results,” Ashrawi explains. “We have no magic wand to wave that will end our internal shortcomings. Our efforts are incremental. We do our research. We write reports. Our staff is constantly at work.”

The AMAN coalition has identified four areas of reform. The first is to work with the Legislative Council and the judiciary in an effort to increase the transparency and accountability of local governments. In a second strategy, coalition members are encouraging the Palestinian media to give careful attention to political parties and to the private sector. A third major approach concerns the electoral system. A “Palestinian Corruption Index” has been developed as a tool for assessing the levels of corruption and specific recommendations are being made based on the assessments.

The final area is regarded by Azmi Al-Shuaibi, AMAN’s general coordinator, as key to the entire effort: encouraging good governance and transparency and combating corruption.

According to Ziad Abdul-Fattah, director of the Wafa news agency in Gaza City, “Change is required not only because of corruption, but because of mismanagement, negligence, and above all the need for modernity—which are all reasons that surpass corruption.”

Abdul Rahman, president of the Arab Thought Forum, says that Palestinians are eager for democracy, but that the reform must be undertaken internally. “We need to hold elections,” he said. “But it is impossible to think of democratic elections, in which the issues are freely discussed, so long as we are occupied by Israel. The closures, the multiple checkpoints, the inability of candidates to move about freely, the personal threats—all these work against us.”

Bernard Sabella, the Bethlehem University sociologist who directs the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees for the Middle East Council of Churches, points out that corruption is common to all societies. “Look at Enron,” he said. “What we lack is vision from our leaders.

“Our National Authority,” he said, “has been forced by Israel and the United States to devote all its energy and all its brainpower to Israel’s security and to guarding against Sharon’s multiple efforts to build settlements, control water and other resources, and to deny Palestinians their rights in Jerusalem.”

Sabella is pessimistic. "There seems no way out. You Americans always want to see light at the end of the tunnel. We don't even have a tunnel." He cited the way Israel seized and removed the academic records of all Palestinian college students when the soldiers invaded the universities and destroyed the Ministry of Education in Ramallah.

In Israel, there is a growing recognition that Israelis, too, could—and maybe should—be called upon to reform. Yoel Marcus, a columnist for *Ha'aretz*, the liberal Tel Aviv daily, last month asked: "If Arafat demanded that Israel carry out reforms before sitting down to the negotiating table, I wonder what he would ask for. To replace Sharon with a relevant leader? To stop the incitement against the Palestinians? To trim the government by getting rid of 15 ministers? To hand over Yatom for the attempted assassination of Khaled Meshal? To haul Eli Yatzpan in front of a judge? To end religious coercion? To give up our nuclear weapons and elect Ahmed Tibi president? When are we going to stop manufacturing excuses?"

In the end, Shikaki believes that political reform must be part of a three-part package. "An end to the present violence must be accompanied by hope for the Palestinians," he says, speaking passionately of statehood and the removal of at least some Israeli settlements. "Then comes the adoption of a constitution and elections. And finally, within a year, the permanent status agreement must be signed." He underscores the importance of a clear and short timeline.

Ashrawi agrees on the importance of a short, clearly defined timetable. "Sharon will always want delay," she says. "The current wave of violence came because the so-called Oslo peace process was constantly delayed."