

# Bipolar Tension and Employee Relations Challenge at a Higher Education Institution

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This is a case of employee relations challenge at ASE, a Palestinian higher education institution (HEI). It reflects on real narratives and experiences of an accumulative and an endured conflict between ASE's labor union and its top management due to rigid administrative policies and pitfalls while transitioning through a strategic reform. The case urges readers to revert to the roots, envisage, and analyze 'internal employee relations under crises' from a dialogical and a sociopolitical perspective based on ideas drawn from the Habermas's 'Theory of Communicative Action' (TCA). HEIs are envisaged as sovereign workplaces that function on pluralistic values generating positive dialogue communication between all stakeholders and subsequently healthy employee relations. This case examines different episodes where ASE's management utilized autocratic leadership for utilitarian drivers causing employee exclusion and mounting tensions on campus. Consequently, several forms of overt resistance prevailed including strikes, apathy, and work interruptions.*

## **ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND**

ASE University is a Palestinian higher education institution (HEI) which was established in 1973 with the aim of supporting and developing the Palestinian community, mainly the youth. Since its establishment, ASE has continued to develop and educate forthcoming generations so that they can penetrate the labor market and become active citizens who are capable of handling leadership positions to develop their country. The university is located in the middle of the West Bank (WB) region in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt), specifically in a densely populated geographic area, which offers an opportunity to attract a representative yet a diversified segment of top talented students and educators. Also, its location offers it the privilege of accessing support services.

The university opened its doors for student admission in October 1973, by offering a limited number of programs in three different colleges. At that time, the number of its academic and administrative staff was around sixty workers. Over its lifetime, ASE has been growing steadily however, in 1996 it experienced a downturn due to upheaval challenges that forced it to go through multiple strategic alterations. The first challenge involved heightened competition between the existing Palestinian Universities in the West Bank; nine local universities that offered bachelor's and master's degrees in similar tracks provided aggressive competition for ASE. The competitors devised new projects which overlapped with those of ASE. Some even induced novel programs which attracted a high percentage of junior students. Consequently, ASE suffered from students' attrition that led to a retrenchment in enrollment rates.

Congruently, a second major internal organizational challenge of limited financial budgets and a fragile infrastructure, characterized by insufficient resources and capabilities (i.e. land, buildings, teaching rooms, secondary resources, etc.) faced ASE during the same period. Given the fact that the country of Palestine has been illegally occupied by Israel for over seventy years to date; in the year 2000, an intensified Israeli–Palestinian conflict elevated during the second Intifada. In accordance, the academic process suffered from continuous interruptions due to Israeli assaults and imposed restricted geographic movement between and within Palestinian cities and/or towns. The political instability impaired the situation for most of the local HEIs causing the emergence of new forms of challenges. Consequently, similar to several other Palestinian universities, ASE faced budgetary cuts from the higher education formal bodies such as the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) during a period of severe economic recession.

Nevertheless, ASE was able to utilize several opportunities to overcome the current situation. It took advantage of the generational boom as birth rates skyrocketed post-1991 and until 2000. In accordance, in 2017 and 2018, the number of high school

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