_____

Nepotism in the Workplace: A Case Study of Libya's Public Sector

المحسوبية في مكان العمل: دراسة حالة للقطاع العام في ليبيا

د. المبروك درباش* ـ كلية الاقتصاد والعلوم السياسية ـ جامعة طرابلس.

ملخص:

تفضيل أفراد الأسرة أو الأصدقاء المقربين في المواقف المتعلقة بالعمل يُعرف بالمحسوبية، ووجودها يُؤثر سلباً على فعالية المؤسسة وعدالة العمل. لقد تسببت المحسوبية في ليبيا، في القطاع العام، في أضرار واسعة النطاق ليس فقط لأنها تُقلل من قيمة الجدارة الفردية، ولكن أيضًا تُضعف الإطار الأكبر للتخطيط الإداري في الإدارة العامة. تُقوِّض المحسوبية النتائج التشغيلية والاستراتيجية من خلال تشويه تخصيص الموارد، وتقييد مجموعة المرشحين المناسبين، والتدخل في نظم إدارة الأداء. تعتبر ليبيا مثالًا واضحًا لدراسة الطبيعة الفاضحة للمحسوبية في التوظيف العام. كما أن لدى ليبيا مشاكل أخرى، واحدة منها هي كونها تعتمد على اقتصاد إيجار النفط والذي بدوره يساهم على تفشي المحسوبية

Nepotism in the Workplace: A Case Study of Libya's Public Sector

Dr. Mabruk Derbash* - Faculty of Economy and Political Sciences, University of Tripoli.

1. Abstract

Nepotism in Libyan public sector has created far reaching damage not only as it undercuts individual merit but also impairs the larger framework of managerial planning in the public sphere. It compromises both operational and strategic results by distorting resource allocation, restricting the pool of suitable candidates, and interfering with performance management systems. Libya makes a glaring example for studying the brazen nature of nepotism in public employment. Libya also has other problems one of which is its being an oil rent economy which in turns acts as a helper to nepotism. In this article I will outline some of the issues related to this issue.

_____

2. Keywords

Nepotism, Public sector, Libya, Managerial planning, Workforce.

3. Introduction

Favoring family members or close friends in work-related situations is referred to as nepotism, and its existence impairs organizational effectiveness and work equity. Nepotism is the adverse to long-term growth objectives and transparent service delivery that encompasses capable leadership and efficient institutional design. The continuing of giving undeserving preference family members or friends in the public sector, Libyan politicians jeopardize organizational culture and effectiveness, equity, and strategic planning. The practice has eroded institutional integrity and public trust in the public sector, where meritocracy is essential for fair service delivery and national progress (Weber, 1946). Libya's public sphere offers a particularly valid argument for conducting research that studies the relationship between managerial planning and unapologetic nepotism. Libya's governance situation has been marked by fragmentation, weakened institutions and an increasing reliance on unofficial networks that is built on familial ties and tribal affiliations since the events of the 2011 and the fall of centralized authority. Of course, not to say that this did not exist before, but the intensity of the practice now is far worse. These networks frequently have an impact on recruiting and promotion decisions made by the general public, creating a bureaucratic culture that prioritizes loyalty above competence. In such a setting, personal favoritism usually takes precedence over organized managerial planning, which is founded on workforce needs assessments, succession planning, and performance-based evaluations.

Furthermore, rather than providing effective public services, Libya's public sector, which employs a sizable section of the labour force, has historically functioned as a means of allocating patronage. The way nepotism thrives is through using the void left by the absence of formalized planning and performance management. Ding away with nepotistic practices is only one of the challenges Libya faces as it strives to rebuild its state institutions. Another way to combat that is by creating governance frameworks that prioritize

accountability, long-term institutional resilience and strategic human resource planning.

4. Literature Review

According to Rose-Ackerman (1999), nepotism is a loud type of corruption that skews resource and quality distribution, erodes trust amongst citizens, and restricts institutional capacity to points of no functionality. Max Weber (1946), in his bureaucratic model, warns against the perils of patrimonialism and promotes merit-based workplace (Weber, 1946). Susan Rose-Ackerman, a researcher on this topic, has examined how nepotism hinders governance and its impact on promoting informal networks over that of formal legal processes. The idea of [1]*wasta,* which is a term used to express favoritism, is central to institutional culture in the MENA area. The other problem with this is that it conveys a survival strategy in weak regimes (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993).

Comparative studies show that countries with high levels of nepotism in the public sector, such as Nigeria, Iraq, Israel and Gulf states also lack service delivery and political cohesiveness. Libya's predicament also fits within this broader pattern; however, it has been intensified by the country's protracted conflict and institutional shortcomings (Transparency International, Various Reports). For instance, and, according to Kilani and Sakijha, *wasta* is commonplace practice in Jordanian civil sector appointments, which led to public discontent and feelings of prejudice (2002). Also, and according to a study done in Egypt by Barsoum (2015), preferentialism and informal networks have a significant impact on job outcomes in the public sector.

 Furthermore, recent reports have shown how these problems have gotten worse. Some of these reports are a 2024 assessment, Libya's political turmoil has caused negative impact on the performance of the public sector, which., in turn, has continued to result in subpar services in several areas, including, but not limited to, healthcare and education (Libya Herald, 2024).

---

[1] Wastta is an Arabic word for expressing favoritism and corruption that usually involves the state and its agencies.

5. Forms and Manifestations of Nepotism

Historically, the Libya's public sector has supported the country's economy and employed most of its workforce. This has become more impacting considering how weak and muddled the private sector was weak. After the events of 2011 and the overthrow of the Gaddafi government, access to public employment has become easier. Promotion became determined by familial ties, and tribal affiliations (Transparency International, Various Reports).

In recent years, the problem has gotten worse. Even with compensation increases from 2021 to 2023 and 2024 research has found that the rising cost of living rendered that increase insufficient as household expenses kept rising. Also, overstaffing has also been caused by haphazard employment practices. By mid-2024, the public sector has and continued to employ about 2.5 million people, or about 31% of the entire Libyan population. This overstaffing has placed a strain on public resources, as wage distributions accounted for about 54% of all government spending in 2024 (Libya Herald, 2024). To be more precise, nepotism in Libya's public sector is pervasive and multifaceted. Common manifestations include:

1) Recruitment based on kinship or tribal connections rather than qualifications;
2) Promotion of individuals with personal or political ties to senior officials;
3) Unequal distribution of state employment opportunities;
4) Widespread usage of *'wasta'* (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993).

The sum of these actions have undermined meritocratic ideals and solidified a society. According to a 2020 audit conducted by Libya's National Audit Office, tribal or family ties plays a role in the more than 30% of hiring decisions in important ministries that did not adhere to open recruitment practices (Libya National Audit Office Report, 2020).

In 2025, the Administrative Control Authority (ACA) suspended state scholarships and new state sector job appointments due to unethical hiring practices that resulted in overstaffing and financial distress. The ACA noted

that the financial impact of unregulated recruitment was highlighted by the fact that pay allocations increased from 21 billion dinars in 2020 to 67 billion dinars by the end of 2024 (Libya Herald, 2025).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach using the case study analytical techniques is used in this study. A sum of primary coupled with secondary sources were used to get the data. Examples of those are:

> a) official reports and audits from the Libya National Audit Office;
> b) Publications by international organizations such as Transparency International and the United Nations Development Programme;
> c) Academic literature and books on nepotism, corruption, and governance in the MENA region;
> d) Media reports and investigative journalism highlighting specific instances of nepotism within Libya's public sector.

In order to establish patterns and narratives of nepotism, I have comprised document analysis. Also, comparative case studies from other countries with comparable governance issues were included. Fieldwork and interviews were scarce because of Libya's political sensitivity and continuous instability. Therefore, verified public documents and content analysis of official communications were the focus.

6. Synthesis Research

Several important themes over the nature of nepotism in Libya's public sector has surfaced. This was as a result of the qualitative case study technique used here. Also, this was mapped out from document analysis, public audit reports, scholarly literature, and some regional case studies. These common themes were:

> First, the weakening of formal institutional frameworks is prevalent within the practice of informal networks. According to data from Libya's National Audit Office, from the year 2020, a 1/3 of all appointments lacked transparency or merit-based examination, which showed that hiring decisions in several ministries did not follow official recruitment rules that were in place already. This tendency is consistent with research conducted in Jordan and Egypt, where meritocratic standards in public

_____

employment have been replaced by comparable informal systems (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Barsoum, 2015).

Second, the lack of strategic human resource planning was consistently identified at various institutions. In addition to that, recruitment and promotion practices were mostly reactive and politically motivated rather than guided by planning and performance assessments. As highlighted by UNDP, in 2019, governance assessments across the MENA region, what lead to fragmented and inefficient public service delivery is weak institutional capacity and minimal investment in professional HR systems.

Third, the synthesis revealed that the consequences of nepotism extend beyond inefficiency to systemic corruption, employee demoralization, and increased public distrust. It is important to mention that because some in important positions are shielded from accountability by personal ties rather than being held to evaluation standards, nepotism continued to flourish (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Transparency International, 2021). This usually feeds a vicious cycle of stagnation in the public sector and poor performance.

Fourth, comparative analysis with Arab states that have much in common like Jordan, Egypt, and Tunisia highlights the role of serious reform and digital transformation of governance in curbing nepotism. For instance, E-recruitment platforms, legislative clarity, and civic education initiatives in those countries could shift public expectations and institutional behavior towards transparency and accountability (OECD, 2016; Kilani & Sakijha, 2002). These insights offer valuable best practices for a country like Libya, where similar reforms could be adapted.

The syntheses from the data illustrate that nepotism in Libya is not merely an administrative failure but a deeply embedded sociopolitical phenomenon that requires serious political well. It thrives in the absence of what is most important to societal productivity and deliverance of services such as structured managerial planning, legal enforcement, and cultural change. Addressing it will require a multi-dimensional response that integrates

institutional reform with strategic human capital development and a long-term shift in public service values.

7. Effects of Nepotism

The consequences of overall shadow of nepotism on Libya's public sector are extensive. Some of which but not limited to them include influencing governance, institutional performance, and broader social dynamics. These consequences can be observed in a variety of areas: one of which lack of efficiency, low employee morale and performance, unapologetic corruption, massive brain drain that can hinder the future of Libya for decades, social fragmentation, and finally skewed national development.

a) Decreased Efficiency and Productivity

Nepotism negatively impacts the effectiveness of public institutions by filling their positions with individuals who might not be technically qualified to hold their position. The selection process is normally by tribal, clan, or party affiliation, rather than professional capacity and experience (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). As a result, senior administrative positions in services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure fall to less qualified applicants. This makes for inefficiency, as such workers may be lacking in technical skills or capability to carry out their work tasks effectively. It is also evident from research that where loyalty, rather than merit, drives choice, public sector productivity as a whole is decreased (Weber, 1946). In Libya, the poor quality of public services and the inability to fulfill citizens' demands are usually explained by the practice of appointing people on the basis of patronage networks, not competence (Transparency International, 2020).

b) Low Employee Morale and Low Job Satisfaction

To employees serving in a meritocratic system, nepotism is a debilitating morale and satisfaction blow. Merit employees often get passed up for promotion and important assignments by those who have personal connections with powerful people, resulting in disappointment and anger. Employee motivation and workplace engagement literature suggests that fairness and transparency in recruitment and promotion are key to retaining and maintaining high morale and job satisfaction (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). Employees get demotivated and even turnover if they believe promotions are

_____

merit-free or performance-free and instead of receiving the reward, they receive the punishment (Kilani & Sakijha, 2002). In Libya, government workers usually complain about the system and feel disengaged and demotivated because they cannot address effectively the nation's governance issues.

c) Corruption and Accountability Issues

Libyan public administration nepotism is locked into corruption in that individuals brought in by patronage networks are less answerable to the public. These individuals can work towards advancing their own or political agendas while defrauding the public interest, engaging in corrupt activities like bribery or embezzlement (Transparency International, 2020). This creates a culture where official duties are viewed as the means of personal enrichment, rather than something about which one has a public service obligation. This is made worse by the public sector's transparency deficit in Libya, in that it becomes difficult to monitor, or govern the activities of those who benefit from nepotistic inclinations. This type of system offers little incentive to officials to uphold integrity, as they are convinced that they are above scrutiny (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). The inefficiency and lack of governance that results add to other public distrust in addition to eroding institutional credibility.

d) Brain Drain and Loss of Talents

The most significant impacts of nepotism in Libya are the flight of skilled and competent personnel from the public sector. The moment a skilled worker understands that chances for advancement are minimal due to nepotism, they end up going elsewhere in search of better and fair opportunities. This "brain drain" danger leaves Libya without skilled workers, which further aggravating the country's problems in healthcare, education, and technology (Barsoum, 2015). Qualified individuals who are disillusioned by the lack of career advancement possibilities in Libya will eventually start looking overseas with better institutions and more room for professional growth. The caveat here is that subsequent brain drain puts further pressure on Libya's capacity to reform institutions and develop the economy.

---

e) Social Fragmentation and Greater Inequality

Nepotism deepens social cleavages by giving preference to some groups for political, tribal, or family-related advantages. In Libya, public sector recruitment is likely to reflect the monopoly of specific families or areas or partly political groups to public employment, which would result in discrimination in access to public jobs. It promotes tribal and regional disparity, which erodes national unity. MENA research explains the ways in which wasta, the social relation equivalent of nepotism used in Arabic culture, perpetuates differences between societal groups, inducing social fragmentation (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). Marginalised groups in Libya outside the governing groups may be disenfranchised from benefits of state employment, leading to resentment and underpinning greater social unrest (Kilani & Sakijha, 2002). This social fragmentation threatens national unity and makes it more difficult to achieve political stability or long-term development.

f) Impact on Governance and National Development

Widespread prevalence of nepotism in the Libyan public sector is profoundly felt within governance and national development. In providing unjust preferential treatment for personal or political loyalty ahead of merit, government ability to enhance and establish well-functioning policies is lost. As such, national development targets are normally ruined. The failure to acquire high-quality people in key government positions also means that public sector projects aimed at creating infrastructure, education, and healthcare are less likely to succeed (Weber, 1946). Inefficiency and corruption resulting from nepotism draw attention away from initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable development and paralyze the state in delivering services to citizens (Rose-Ackerman, 1999).

8. Institutional and Structural Challenges

Nepotism in Libya's public sector is not a matter of individual players acting out self-interest, but rather a matter of a systemic process based on a chain of institutional and structural determinants. Weak legal and regulative structures, informal network domination, opacity, and the influence of non-state actors

such as militias all have led to a pattern of favoritism and corruption that inhibits the building of meritocratic systems in the public sector.

a) Weak Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

The legal and regulatory institutions regarding nepotism tend to be weak and unenforceable. While the laws are there that theoretically should encourage merit-based recruitment as well as anticorruption measures, they are typically inadequately enforced. This is partially due to the fact that the divided political system that has been present since the downfall of the Gaddafi regime renders enforcement difficult. Various political factions and military units have been able to circumvent legal constraints and make appointments on the basis of personal loyalty, rather than law (Libya National Audit Office, 2020). Therefore, even when the legal framework exists to prevent nepotism, it is circumvented or distorted to serve specific political or tribal interests (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). With no integrated legal system and strong enforcement institutions, the public sphere is still vulnerable to nepotism.

b) Dominance of Patron-Client Relationships and Informal Networks

Another prevailing force facilitating nepotism in Libya isthe influence of patron-client relations and networks is. These networks, based on tribal affiliations, political loyalty, or family ties, play a determining role in the distribution of government jobs and assets. Studies in the MENA region have found that informal networks are more powerful than official bureaucratic structures since they allow decision-makers to avoid official procedures (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). In Libya, such networks have gained hold in public sector hiring procedures, and individuals have depended on personal relationships in a bid to secure employment, receive promotions, and receive access to resources. The dominance of the informal networks erodes the institution of a meritocratic system and perpetuates a system in which political or tribal allegiance takes priority over ability (Kilani & Sakijha, 2002). This creates the environment for a culture in which nepotism runs rampant with impunity.

_____

c) Absence of Transparency in Recruitment and Promotion Procedures

Part of the intended or unintended promotion of nepotism is the lack of transparency in the recruitment and promotion processes. According to a report done in 2020, hiring is typically done behind closed doors and without clear, public standards, (Transparency International, 2020). The absence of open procedures guarantees that the public will not be able to hold authorities accountable for their actions. This lack of accountability creates a fertile ground for favoritism since the powerful do not feel obligated to justify or explain their decisions (Weber, 1946).

d) Militias and Non-State Actors in Public Administration

Militias and non-state actors in the political environment in Libya have also contributes to nepotism. Armed groups and militias have become the de facto government since 2011, placing members of their organizations into public administration roles on a regular basis. This has led to a very unstable and fractured system where nepotism and patronage are used to secure loyalty and control over the institutions they preside on (Libya National Audit Office, 2020). Militias also prioritize loyalty over merit by placing individuals who have the same political or tribal interests in government positions rather than the most competent individuals. This has been to blame for Libya's continuous instability in the public sector as the absence of merit appointments renders government institutions ineffective and incapable of handling issues of the state (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993).

9. Strategies for Reform

Fighting the entrenched issue of nepotism within the public sector involves a comprehensive strategy that includes legal, institutional, technological and most importantly cultural reforms. From the experience of Arab countries that have struggled with the same governance challenges, Libya could create a multi-faceted strategy to curb favoritism and promote meritocracy.

First, Libya's leaders must start building an effective legal framework that describes and penalizes nepotism in public recruitment is one of the most vital reforms. The idea here is to draw legal codes that specify the boundaries of ethical behavior and outline the penalties for engaging in nepotism. In Jordan, for instance, the government enacted amendments to its civil service law in

the early 2000s to combat favoritism in hiring by instituting competitive tests and monitoring committees (Kilani & Sakijha, 2002). Libya could benefit from a similar legal reform through the creation of a National Public Employment Authority that is tasked with regulating hiring practices and enforcing anti-nepotism policies in every ministry and department.

In addition, merit-based hiring systems aught to be institutionalized to stem arbitrary appointments. Together with the presence of external observers on the hiring committee and open calls for application, the way to establish fairness is to standardized hiring procedures with open recruitment processes, and unblemished anonymous candidate evaluations. This could help eliminate tribal, political, or family biases. Egypt's civil service reform has moved to circumscribe unofficial recruitment by instilling a centralized system of recruitment (Barsoum, 2015). A central civil service examination, augmented by rigorous monitoring systems, would ensure qualifications and capacity are the principal determinants of recruitment in Libya.

Capacity development would have to keep pace with legal and institutional reform to provide civil servants with the tools and competencies to maintain such standards. Professional courses focused on ethics, performance management, and best practice in human resources are fundamental. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has emphasized the importance of public sector capacity development to enhance integrity and fight corruption in MENA countries (UNDP, 2019). Training objectives in Libya might be tailored to the local context, with modules on tribal relations, post-conflict reconstruction, and public service accountability.

Moreover, the inclusion of digital governance tools could increase transparency and reduce human discretion in recruitment. The use of e-recruitment websites application processes, and selection outcomes online can reduce the scope for nepotism. For example, Tunisia's e-governance initiative has significantly increased public access to employment information and reduced corruption in recruitment by making processes viewable and limiting the scope of personal influence (OECD, 2016). A similar digital infrastructure in Libya can be a basis for broader governance reforms.

On the societal level, there must be campaigns of public awareness and civic education to alter existing social norms accepting or even expecting nepotism. In the majority of Arab societies, social networking wasta is an accepted way of getting a job. However, studies have shown that civic education classes have the potential to change attitudes. Transparency International (2021) noted that anti-corruption education initiatives in Lebanon and Palestine generated a concrete decrease in young people's acceptance of nepotism. Libya's education system and media can significantly play a role in disseminating a culture of meritocracy through targeted messaging and public debate.

Finally, international cooperation could be employed to finance reform implementation and oversight. International organizations such as Transparency International, and the UNDP can offer technical support, financing, and oversight to ensure reforms. In failed states, such as what some think Libya is one, foreign non-political powers could impose stability and credibility required for implementing effective governance reforms. International alliances can also permit regional benchmarks with other regional measures and the sharing of best practices from other areas in post-conflict settings.

A further concern is regional equity in recruitment. Nepotism in Libya often includes regional and tribal prejudice, leading to imbalance in the employment of employment and reinforcing social cleavages. Decentralization of the power of recruitment—maintaining national standards—may make local governments responsible for redressing regional imbalances. However, decentralization must be accompanied by stringent accountability measures so that nepotism is not simply relegated to the local sphere (UNDP, 2019).

10. Conclusion

Nepotism is one of the biggest inhibitions to good governance and public sector development in Libya. Nepotism warps recruitment and promotion processes, undermines institutional ability, and corrupts citizens' confidence in state institutions. Perhaps most importantly, nepotism undermines the ground rules of good managerial planning—a process essential to aligning

_____

human resources with national priorities, for effective delivery of services, and for innovation in the public sector.

Failure to plan strategically for recruitment, promotion, and professional development means that Libya's institutions end up being filled not with the most able or best qualified but with the connected. Failure of strategic planning in human capital management is one of the reasons that lead to inefficiency in Libya, a lack of accountability, and poor public sector performance. Without this basic problem being tackled, broader attempts at public administration reform will not be fruitful.

In response to these forces, Libya must be more serious about institutionalizing planning by the manager in an overarching anti-nepotism drive. This encompasses the development and implementation of clear hiring procedures, capacity building on strategic workforce planning, and harnessing data analytics tools to track and assess human resource performance. A focus on planning does more than just optimize institutional efficiency. It makes an explicit statement across the institution that public sector hiring is about working in the interest of the country—not the interests of self.

Overall, the removal of nepotism is not a matter of legal reform or moral persuasion—so much as it is a managerial challenge. By integrating anti-nepotism measures into a regime of thorough strategic planning, that encompasses the managerial and the financial aspects of it, Libya can begin to build a small, productive, representative, and developmental public sector.

11. References:

Barsoum, G. (2015). *Young people's job aspirations in Egypt: The role of social networks and economic environment* (Working Paper No. 939). Economic Research Forum. https://erf.org.eg/publications/young-peoples-job-aspirations-in-egypt-the-role-of-social-networks-and-economic-environment/

Cunningham, R. B., & Sarayrah, Y. K. (1993). *Wasta: The hidden force in Middle Eastern society*. Praeger.

Kilani, S., & Sakijha, B. (2002). *Wasta: Favoritism and nepotism in Jordanian society*. Amman: Arab Archives Institute.

Libya National Audit Office. (2020). *Annual audit report*. Tripoli: National Audit Office. [Report in Arabic].

OECD. (2016). *Open government: The global context and the way forward*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264268104-en

Rose-Ackerman, S. (1999). *Corruption and government: Causes, consequences, and reform*. Cambridge University Press.

Transparency International. (2021). *Civic education and youth engagement against corruption in MENA*. https://www.transparency.org/en/news/mena-civic-education-against-corruption

Transparency International. (Various years). *Corruption Perceptions Index reports*. https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi

UNDP. (2019). *Arab Human Development Report: Governance and the future of the Arab world*. United Nations Development Programme. https://www.arab-hdr.org/

Weber, M. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* (H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, Eds. & Trans.). Oxford University Press.