

Palestinian Elections: Gamble, Potential, or Political Maneuver?

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The announcement by Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas that general elections would be held for the three Palestinian national institutions prompts various questions. Along with widespread hope for intra-Palestinian renewal and reconciliation, there are doubts that improvement would be possible after the elections, given the coronavirus crisis, public distrust of both political leaderships – Fatah and Hamas, and inter-organizational suspicion. Above all, the question is where Abbas is heading, as he took on extensive powers before announcing the election. Can relations be restored with the Biden administration if there is a possible integration of Hamas into the Palestinian Authority? Or is Abbas trying to steer the process to a direction of his liking? Israel, which has no interest in Fatah failing and Abbas losing the election, must examine the unfolding dynamic with the relevant security channels and allies in the international arena, and at the same time draw a new, realistic political and economic horizon.

On January 16, 2021, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas issued a presidential order announcing elections for the three Palestinian national institutions – the presidency, the Legislative Council, and the Palestinian National Council. The order stipulates that the elections will be held in stages, from May to August 2021. The previous election order was issued in 2009, and was revoked less than 120 days later due to the split between Fatah and Hamas. This is the first attempt to hold elections for the Palestinian National Council, which since its inception has seen most of its members appointed and not elected.

The order was issued at a time the Palestinian system is suffering an acute internal and external crisis, after years of the Trump administration pushing the Palestinian issue into a corner, the coronavirus pandemic, and harsh public criticism of both the Fatah and Hamas leaderships. Abbas, who stopped security coordination with Israel during the Trump era, was quick to renew it after Biden's victory in the US presidential election, which in turn halted reconciliation efforts between all Palestinian factions. Hamas waived its demand to hold elections for all three institutions on one date – presented as a condition in the reconciliation talks – and this paved the way to the planned elections.

The announcement has given rise to new dynamics in the Palestinian political and public arenas. The election ostensibly signals that there is a higher likelihood than in the past of internal Palestinian reconciliation. Organizations and groups have announced their intention to run; others, including Islamic Jihad, in contrast to their boycott of previous elections, are undecided. Many want to see new, young figures in the leadership who are not identified with the existing establishment, and some in Fatah harbor an expectation of removing Abbas' candidacy. However, these hopes are highly tenuous. Fatah and Hamas, the principal actors that have wrestled with each other for years without a decision, will once again compete. Fatah faces a particularly significant challenge, given personal rivalries that have sparked internal rifts, leading to a division into two camps. The split could lead to a victory for Hamas, as in the 2006 elections, but it is doubtful whether Hamas, whose path of armed resistance has been criticized heavily since the military confrontation with Israel in 2014, is interested in victory. Indeed, its limited international legitimacy emptied its previous political victory of content. At this stage, the organization seeks to integrate with the leadership of the Palestinian Authority and national institutions, including the PLO, and thus build legitimacy for itself at home and in the international arena.

The announcement of elections at the present time can be seen as a joint achievement of Jibril Rajoub, a senior Fatah figure, and Saleh al-Arouri, a senior Hamas figure, who worked to promote inter-organizational reconciliation, knowing elections are far from guaranteed, due to a number of obstacles:

- East Jerusalem's participation in the elections, as specified in the presidential order, is subject to Israel's consent. Although it is possible to bypass objections on Israel's part through electronic voting or leaving the eastern part of the city, this will mean difficulties in accessibility and fewer voters.
- Suspicion among the opposition factions of Fatah and Hamas intentions, and the possibility that the two will run on a joint list or agree on the division of seats between them. Spokesmen for both organizations do not deny such a possibility and even raise it as a legitimate issue for discussion in the preparatory talks to be held in Cairo.
- Alienation from the general public, especially among young people, who perceive the election as a mechanism to guarantee the status of the two failing leaderships, which have lost vitality and legitimacy. Against this background, calls are heard for the establishment of new political frameworks.
- Public outrage at the widespread economic distress due to Abbas's decision not to receive tax money from Israel. The anger is also evident among many officials in the Gaza Strip who rely on the PA and whose salaries have been cut in recent years. This may affect the extent of the public's confidence in this election and threaten their participation. Fatah Central Committee member Ahmad Khalis, a Gaza

- resident, has promised on behalf of Abbas to restore the situation to what it was before the cuts.
- Mohammed Dahlan's intention to run, and in particular the possibility that he will join popular Marwan Barghouti, and criticism from the nephew of Yasir Arafat Nasser al-Qadawah, who approached Dahlan about holding the pre-reconciliation elections, increase fears among Abbas and his associates. Dahlan's representatives suggest – for the record only, and knowing that the idea will be rejected – to run on a joint Fatah list and warn of a split that could lead to the loss of the organization's historic status.

To ensure a response to every possible development, Abbas, two days before issuing the election order, took two far-reaching steps. One is a reform in the legal system, namely, the establishment of an independent administrative court, which is subordinate directly to him. This ostensibly allows him to take a wide range of actions, including the dissolution of parliament, the postponement of elections, and even their abolition, as well as imposing restrictions on civil servants seeking election. The second step is a change in the law stating that this is no longer an election for the Palestinian Authority but for the State of Palestine, that is, for the President and the Legislative Council of the State of Palestine. It also repeals the stipulation in the 2007 law, after the Hamas victory in 2006, whereby every candidate in the election must accept the obligations assumed by the PLO. The first move angered Palestinian jurists and publicists because it harms the courts, and because of the many powers Abbas assumed for himself. The second, which in practical terms means the annulment of the Oslo Accords and the possibility of nominating organizations that do not recognize the PLO, oppose Israel's policy, and deny Israel's existence, did not evoke much reaction.

The question arises as to Abbas's intentions. What motivates him, at his advanced age, to make such a significant reform in the judicial system on the eve of the election and change the election law, in a way that could cause complications with the Biden administration, when the decision to hold the election was actually intended to please the US? Why has he rushed to hold elections after rejections of all attempts at inter-organizational reconciliation in recent years? Is he not afraid of the consequences of the split in the ranks of Fatah itself?

The answer lies in the way Abbas has conducted himself lately, as an omnipotent monarch. At the political level, he ostensibly made two contradictory moves. On the one hand, he renewed security coordination with Israel and expressed a public readiness to return to political negotiations in an international framework without excluding the United States as the sole mediator (as during President Trump's era), and on the other hand, he renewed the reconciliation process with Hamas. But a political process with Israel will not be renewed without removing the three demands that the Quartet placed on Hamas as a condition for

its participation in negotiations (recognition of Israel, renouncement of terrorism, and honoring the agreements signed by the PLO). Hamas continues to reject these conditions, and it is unclear how Abbas will succeed in mustering international legitimacy for a joint government with Hamas, as well as ensuring cooperation with Israel and the resumption of the political process.

Given these obstacles, is the election announcement merely a political maneuver? Is it possible that Abbas and the Fatah leadership believe they can persuade the Biden administration and Europe, while relying on the Western antagonism toward the Trump administration, to legitimize the inclusion of Hamas in power? Or is it an attempt to ward off pressure from home and abroad to hold democratic elections, as well as to make it clear to the United States and Europe that free elections require the participation of Hamas. It may even be an attempt to draw closer to the West to pressure Israel to agree to resume the political process on more favorable terms for the Palestinians – a preferred option relative to the risk involved in Hamas's participation in the elections.

Abbas is trying to maneuver between these limitations, and it is not inconceivable that he chose to announce elections in order to initiate a process that would not necessarily be realized. After Hamas waived the demand to hold elections for all institutions at the same time, Abbas had no choice but to issue the election order – once he assumed most of the powers that give him control of the Palestinian arena before, between, and after election campaigns. He seems to believe that the moves he has taken, and the failure of the Trump plan which in the Palestinian arena is largely credited to him, will allow him to restore relations with the United States and perhaps even advance political moves that are in line with Biden's strategy, as well as ensure the status of Fatah and the continued activity of the mechanisms built during the 15 years of his rule. Although Abbas is generally not considered a gambler, especially compared to his predecessor Yasir Arafat, it seems that at this stage of his life he feels confident enough to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, despite the risks involved. It is also possible that he notices a certain thawing in the position of Hamas, which since the presentation of the Trump plan, has emphasized its interest in integrating into the Palestinian political system, continued to strive for inter-organizational reconciliation, and even refrained from blatantly attacking renewed coordination with Israel.

In any case, if Abbas hopes to avoid elections, notwithstanding his presidential order, this matches Israel's preference not to hold them, as they could result in a downfall of Abbas himself and the defeat of Fatah. Despite its difficulties, Hamas is in a better starting position than Fatah. Damage to the stability of the Palestinian Authority, a threat to its survival, and Abbas's departure from the stage do not serve Israel's security interests. However, Israel must refrain from portraying itself as undermining democratic procedures in the Palestinian

arena. At the same time, it must examine in security channels, and coordinate with the US administration, with France and Germany – which enjoy some influence over Abbas – and with the relevant Arab countries, with emphasis on Egypt and Jordan, Abbas's intentions. Is the Oslo era indeed over, or is this an attempt to return the Palestinian issue to the international agenda, or both? Israel would do well to draw a new and hopeful horizon that could strengthen the status of the Palestinian Authority through the renewal of the political process, in close coordination with the US administration and its regional partners, and encourage economic improvement in the Palestinian arena by including it in the Abraham Accords. At the same time, it must ensure law enforcement and order in the West Bank to reduce tensions between the local Israeli and Palestinian populations.