

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

May 30, 2005

POSTPONEMENT OF ELECTIONS TO THE PALESTINIAN LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Shlomo Brom
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

The Central Elections Committee of the Palestinian Authority has informed Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), the president of the PA, that it cannot carry out the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) as scheduled on 17 July. The reason, according to the CEC, is that it needs at least two months following ratification of the new elections law to make proper arrangements. That law has passed its third reading in parliament but has not yet been signed by Abu Mazen and therefore has not gone into effect. But beyond the technical constraints, suspicions are being voiced that the delay is due to the desire of leading figures in Fatah, Abu Mazen's own party, to gain a few months' grace in order to put their house in order and improve their chances of winning.

The original date for elections is very inconvenient for Fatah. The movement's image among Palestinians is very negative and it is currently torn by internal power struggles which began before the outbreak of the *intifada* and have only intensified since then. In the final years of the Oslo process, Fatah's popularity plummeted for a variety of reasons: corruption and incompetence of Palestinian government agencies controlled by Fatah, unfulfilled expectations that the Oslo process would lead to a rise in standards of living (the opposite

happened), and the failure to achieve national objectives. Oslo was directly identified with Fatah, whose failures it shared. And the failures in governance stemmed largely from Yasir Arafat's centralized ruling style, which stressed direct control of funds to guarantee loyalty and direct control of various agencies in order to play off subordinates against one another.

The *intifada* only made things worse for Fatah. The drastic deterioration in the economic situation heightened the glaring gaps between the general population and the PA leaders and top bureaucrats and therefore reinforced the resentment of widespread corruption. And Israeli actions against the PA dramatized its apparent impotence. The militarization of the *intifada* also led to a contest between Fatah and opposition groups over their respective shares in the violent struggle and encouraged the emergence of armed local gangs unaccountable to anyone within the virtual framework known as "al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades." That meant the emergence of more power centers within Fatah, all competing with one another in a chaotic struggle for status and influence.

This situation produced internal pressure for reform and greater transparency even while Arafat was still alive and, combined with external pressures, forced him to approve the

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

formation of Abu Mazen's first government in 2003. But while Abu Mazen did manage to introduce some concrete changes, especially in the realm of financial management, his government fell in short order and as far as the PA's public image was concerned, what he accomplished was too little, too late.

The major beneficiary of the decline in Fatah's popularity has been Hamas which, unlike Fatah, is seen to have "clean hands." Hamas has thus far boycotted the PA as a by-product of the despised Oslo Agreements and it has therefore not been contaminated by involvement in the day-to-day management of PA affairs. Instead, Hamas, like other Islamist movements, has maintained its own network of social welfare agencies that provide educational, health and charity services to the needy and reinforce its image as a decent alternative to the regime.

These developments have produced a paradoxical situation. The majority of Palestinians support Abu Mazen's political course and prefer continued quiet and a renewal of the peace process with Israel; those preferences are reflected in Abu Mazen's election as chairman of the PA and in ongoing public opinion surveys. At the same time, Abu Mazen's party – Fatah – continues to grow weaker; that trend is evident from its poor showing in recent municipal elections, in which voters showed a clear preference for candidates untainted by Fatah-style corruption.

Fatah leaders are therefore concerned that if they go to the polls in their current state of unpopularity and division, they will suffer a serious defeat despite support for their platform. Such a defeat could destroy the party and produce a situation in which Abu Mazen, facing a parliament dominated by the opposition, would be paralyzed. The circle supporting Abu Mazen within Fatah, made up mostly of younger members from the West Bank and Gaza, estimates that it needs several months to carry out the necessary internal reforms and get rid of

the corrupt "Tunisians" (those who came with Arafat from Tunis). They also assume that a few more months of peace and quiet will bring about perceptible improvements in living standards and that these, along with implementation of the Israeli disengagement, will enhance Fatah's popularity.

The key remaining questions about postponement concern the positions of Hamas and Abu Mazen. Hamas has already registered its strong opposition to anything more than a minor delay for technical reasons and it has threatened to resume the violence in response to any obvious political manipulation of election scheduling. It has also demonstrated its ability to defy the PA and Fatah by staging huge, violent demonstrations in Gaza after the Palestinian courts ordered new municipal elections in towns where Hamas victories prompted Fatah complaints of voting irregularities.

As for Abu Mazen, he feels himself committed to the package-deal he reached with Hamas in Cairo, according to which Hamas would accept a cease-fire (*tahidia*) in return for the integration of Hamas into the Palestinian political system on favorable terms – including a change in the elections law and early PLC elections. In Hamas' view, Abu Mazen has already violated part of his commitment because the PLC-approved law still works to its disadvantage.

Abu Mazen therefore finds himself between the hammer and the anvil. If he defers the elections, he risks a new eruption of Hamas-inspired violence that could defeat his policies and lead to the collapse of his government. But if he rejects a delay, his party is liable to suffer a stinging defeat, with consequences not that different from those of the first scenario. If past performance is any guide, Abu Mazen will try to play the role of statesman standing above politics and to find some kind of compromise between the contradictory demands of Hamas and Fatah.

KEYWORD: Palestinians