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Elections under Fire: Palestine's Impossible Democracy Dilemma

Many Palestinian intellectuals and political analysts find themselves in the unenviable position of having to declare a stance on whether they support or reject upcoming Palestinian elections which are scheduled for May 22 and July 30. But there are no easy answers.

The long-awaited decree by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas last January to hold legislative and presidential elections in the coming months was widely welcomed, not as a triumph for democracy but as the first tangible positive outcome of dialogue between rival Palestinian factions, mainly Abbas' Fatah party and Hamas.

As far as inner Palestinian dialogue is concerned, the elections, if held unobstructed, could present a ray of hope that, finally, Palestinians in the Occupied Territories will enjoy a degree of democratic representation, a first step towards a more comprehensive representation that could include millions of Palestinians outside the Occupied Territories. But even such humble expectations are conditioned on many "ifs": only if Palestinian factions honor their commitments to the Istanbul Agreement of September 24; only if Israel allows Palestinians, including Jerusalemites, to vote unhindered and refrains from arresting Palestinian candidates; only if the US-led international community accepts the outcome of the democratic elections without punishing victorious parties and candidates; only if the legislative and presidential elections are followed by the more consequential and substantive elections in the Palestinian National Council (PNC) – the Palestinian Parliament in exile – and so on.

If any of these conditions is unsatisfactory, the May elections are likely to serve no practical purpose, aside from giving Abbas and his rivals the veneer of legitimacy, thus allowing them to buy yet more time and acquire yet more funds from their financial benefactors.

All of this compels us to consider the following question: is democracy possible under military occupation?

Almost immediately following the last democratic Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, the outcome of which displeased Israel, 62 Palestinian ministers and members of the new parliament were thrown into prison, with many still imprisoned.

History is repeating itself as Israel has already begun its arrest campaigns of Hamas leaders and members in the West Bank. On February 22, over 20 Palestinian activists, including Hamas officials, were detained as a clear message from the Israeli occupation to Palestinians that Israel does not recognize their dialogue, their unity agreements or their democracy.

Two days later, 67-year-old Hamas leader, Omar Barghouti, was summoned by the Israeli military intelligence in the occupied West Bank and warned against running in the upcoming May elections. “The Israeli officer warned me not to run in the upcoming elections and threatened me with imprisonment if I did,” Barghouti was quoted by Al-Monitor.

The Palestinian Basic Law allows prisoners to run for elections, whether legislative or presidential, simply because the most popular among Palestinian leaders are often behind bars. Marwan Barghouti is one.

Imprisoned since 2002, Barghouti remains Fatah’s most popular leader, though appreciated more by the movement’s young cadre, as opposed to Abbas’ old guard. The latter group has immensely benefited from the corrupt system of political patronage upon which the 85-year-old president has constructed his Authority.

To sustain this corrupt system, Abbas and his clique labored to marginalize Barghouti, leading to the suggestion that Israel’s imprisonment of Fatah’s vibrant leader serves the interests of the current Palestinian President.

This claim has much substance, not only because Abbas has done little to pressure Israel to release Barghouti but also because all credible public opinion polls suggest that Barghouti is far more popular among Fatah’s supporters – in fact all Palestinians – than Abbas.

On February 11, Abbas dispatched Hussein al-Sheikh, the Minister of Civilian Affairs and a member of Fatah's Central Committee, to dissuade Barghouti from running in the upcoming presidential elections. An ideal scenario for the Palestinian President would be to take advantage of Barghouti's popularity by having him lead the Fatah list in the contest for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Hence, Abbas could ensure a strong turnout by Fatah supporters, while securing the chair of presidency for himself.

Barghouti vehemently rejected Abbas' request, thus raising an unexpected challenge to Abbas, who now risks dividing the Fatah vote, losing the PLC elections, again, to Hamas and losing the presidential elections to Barghouti.

Between the nightly raids and crackdowns by the Israeli military and the political intrigues within the divided Fatah movement, one wonders if the elections, if they take place, will finally allow Palestinians to mount a united front in the struggle against Israeli occupation and for Palestinian freedom.

Then, there is the issue of the possible position of the 'international community' regarding the outcome of the elections. News reports speak of efforts made by Hamas to seek guarantees from Qatar and Egypt "to ensure Israel will not pursue its representatives and candidates in the upcoming elections," Al-Monitor also reported.

But what kind of guarantees can Arab countries obtain from Tel Aviv, and what kind of leverage can Doha and Cairo have when Israel continues to disregard the United Nations, international law, the International Criminal Court, and so on?

Nevertheless, can Palestinian democracy afford to subsist in its state of inertia? Abbas' mandate as president expired in 2009, the PLC's mandate expired in 2010 and, in fact, the Palestinian Authority was set up as an interim political body, whose function should have ceased in 1999. Since then, the 'Palestinian leadership' has not enjoyed legitimacy among Palestinians, deriving its relevance, instead, from the support of its benefactors, who are rarely interested in supporting democracy in Palestine.

The only silver lining in the story is that Fatah and Hamas have also agreed on the restructuring of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which is now largely monopolized by Abbas' Fatah movement. Whether the democratic revamping of the PLO takes place or not, largely depends on the outcome of the May and July elections.

Palestine, like other Middle Eastern countries, including Israel, does have a crisis of political legitimacy. Since Palestine is an occupied land with little or no freedom, one is justified to argue that true democracy under these horrific conditions cannot possibly be achieved.

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