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Abbas ‘Postponed’ Democracy – So, Who Speaks on Behalf of the Palestinian People?



Image by Planet Volumes.

In April 2021, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas issued a decree postponing parliamentary and presidential elections, which were scheduled to take place in May and July respectively.

The then-85-year-old Palestinian leader justified his unwarranted decision as a result of a ‘dispute’ with Israel over the vote of Palestinians living in the occupied Palestinian city of East Jerusalem.

But that was just a pretense. Though contrary to international law, Israel considers Palestinian East Jerusalem as part of its “eternal and undivided capital”, the cancellation of the elections stemmed from a purely internal Palestinian matter: fears that the outcome of the elections could sideline Abbas and his unelected political apparatus.

Marwan Barghouti, though a member of Abbas’ Fatah party, had decided to throw his hat in the ring, entering the elections under a separate list, the Freedom List. Opinion polls showed that, if Barghouti entered the fray, he could have decisively beaten Abbas.

Those numbers are, in fact, consistent with most Palestinian public opinion polls conducted in recent years.

However, Barghouti, the most popular Palestinian figure in the West Bank, is a prisoner in Israel. He has spent 22 years in Israeli prisons due to his leadership of the Second Palestinian Intifada, the uprising of 2000.

Neither Israel nor Abbas wanted Barghouti, known as the Mandela of Palestine, to acquire any more validation while in prison, thus putting pressure on Israel to release him.

One can only speculate regarding the possible outcomes of the canceled May and July 2021 elections should they have taken place as scheduled. A democratically elected government would have certainly addressed, to some extent, the question of legitimacy, or lack thereof, among all Palestinian factions.

It would have also allowed the incorporation of all major Palestinian groups into a new political structure that would be purely Palestinian – not a mere platform for the whims and interests of specific political groups, business classes or hand-picked ruling elites.

That is all moot now, but the question of legitimacy remains a primary one, as the Palestinian people, more than ever before, require a unified, truly representative leadership that is capable of steering the just cause of Palestine during these horrifically difficult and crucial times.

This new leadership could have also understood the changing global dynamics regarding Palestine and would be compelled, per the will of the Palestinian people, to refrain from utilizing growing international support and sympathies with Gaza for financial perks and limited factional interests.

True, elections under military occupation would never meet the requirements of true democracy. However, if a minimal degree of representation was acquired in the now-canceled elections, the outcome could have served as a starting point towards widening the circle of representation to include the PLO and all Palestinians, in occupied Palestine and in the *shatat* as well.

Palestinians in the *shatat*, the diaspora, have also confronted the question of legitimacy and representation. However well-intentioned, many of these attempts faced, and continue to face, many obstacles, including the impossible geography, increasing political restrictions and limited funding, among other problems.

As the vacuum of truly representative leadership in Palestine remains in place, Washington and its western allies are left to contend with the question themselves: who shall rule the Palestinians? Who shall govern Gaza after the war? Who are the ‘moderate’ Palestinians to

be included in future US-led western schemes and the ‘extremists’ to be shunned and relegated?

The irony is that such thinking, of picking and choosing Palestinian representation, has led, in large part, to the current crisis in Palestine. Segmenting Palestinians according to ideological, geographic and political lines has proved disastrous, not just to the Palestinians themselves but to any entity that is interested in achieving a just peace in Palestine.

The question of representation should be resolved by the Palestinian people and no one else. And, until that task is achieved, we must invest in centering Palestinian voices in every political, legal and social platform that is relevant to Palestine, to the struggle of the Palestinians and to their legitimate aspirations.

Centering Palestinian voices does not mean that any Palestinian is a legitimate representative of the collective Palestinian experience. Indeed, not any Palestinian, regardless of his political views, class orientation, background, and so on can be a worthy ambassador for the Palestinian cause.

Even without organized general elections, we already know so much about what Palestinians want. They want an end to the Israeli occupation, the dismantlement of the illegal settlements, the honoring of the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees, social equality, end to corruption and democratic representation, among other shared values.

These are not my own conclusions, but the views of the majority of Palestinians as indicated in various opinion public polls. Similar sentiments have been expressed and repeated year after year. It follows that any true representative of the Palestinian cause should adhere to these ideals; otherwise, he or she either represents the narrow interests of a faction, a self-serving class or merely reflects his own personal views.

Only those who truly reflect the wider collective Palestinian experience and aspiration deserved to be centered, listened to or engaged with. Doing so would help protect the Palestinian cause of the self-seeking few, who use the Palestinian struggle as an opportunity for personal or factional gains.

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