

Palestinian Local Elections: An Opportunity for Political Revival or a Game of Chicken

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Brief Analysis

Despite optimism from some observers, the proposed Palestinian municipal vote could create a scenario that entrenches divisions and deepens the national political crisis.

On July 15, Hamas made a surprise announcement that it planned to acquiesce to holding the Palestinian municipal elections scheduled for October, generating hopes that this vote could revitalize the country's stagnant political scene. Indeed, an October election would mark the first nationwide Palestinian election since the parliamentary vote of 2006. With the exception of the occasional student election in the West Bank -- Hamas has prevented any such elections in the Gaza Strip -- the two dominant Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah, have not competed in the ballot box for more than a decade. In the absence of elections, the claim by either movement to command a stronger following among Palestinians remains impossible to substantiate.

Yet significant obstacles will need to be overcome for these elections to be held, requiring goodwill from both sides at levels not seen to date. In the current political environment, cancellation of the vote is a real possibility.

Background

The West Bank and Gaza Strip comprise 416 municipalities (391 in the West Bank, 25 in Gaza) ranging from major cities to small villages. The elections are held in accordance with Local Council Elections Law No. 12 of 2005 and are overseen by the Central Elections Commission. Hamas boycotted the last municipal elections, in 2012, and prevented them from being held in Gaza, claiming they were a "unilateral step...undermining reconciliation."

Political parties participate in municipal elections, but they typically run on service-oriented rather than ideological platforms. Issues raised in general elections (e.g., commitment to past agreements with Israel) generally do not

come up in municipal elections. However, the participation of Hamas -- a designated terrorist organization that denies the very legitimacy of the Oslo Accords, the international framework that created the Palestinian Authority (PA) -- is bound to raise policy challenges for the international community.

Municipal elections may also be imperfect in gauging the political power of competing parties, given that -- particularly in villages and towns -- tribes, clans, and large families are central in determining their outcome. Additionally, the service-oriented nature of these elections makes them less well-suited to assessing the popularity of political platforms. That said, such elections could shed light on the parties' organizational cohesion and skill as well as their credibility among the voters.

Are Elections Possible Without Hamas-PA Reconciliation?

A fair and free municipal election would require candidates to be able to campaign effectively, a necessity not easily met in today's deeply divided West Bank and Gaza Strip. Since Hamas's violent takeover of Gaza in 2007, the factions have clamped down on each other's operations in areas under their respective control. In the West Bank, both Israel and the PA regard Hamas as a security threat and have targeted not only its armed wing but also its political and financial infrastructure. Similarly, Hamas has systematically targeted Fatah activists and institutions, severely curtailing its ability to operate in Gaza.

To date, all attempts toward national reconciliation have failed, despite an abundance of formal reconciliation agreements. The two sides have shown almost no political will to reconcile, and have instead spent much energy blaming the other. Feeling mutually threatened, the factions have worked consistently to prevent each other from gaining any foothold in areas they control, with recent statements and actions indicating no shift from this intransigence. In such an environment, expecting either Hamas or Fatah to allow the other to build the organizational and financial infrastructure for a free campaign would be far-fetched.

In addition to the lack of reconciliation, each side has its own dynamics that militate against allowing municipal elections to occur.

Hamas and the Cost of Being a Pariah

Besides being unable to operate freely in the West Bank, Hamas faces another set of challenges associated with its designation as a terrorist organization not only in Israel but also in the United States, the European Union, and other donor states. This means the election of a Hamas member to any municipality would result in a donor boycott of that municipality. Given the importance of donor assistance to cash-strapped municipalities, both these communities and Hamas's political standing could suffer devastatingly as a result. As Hamas's rule in Gaza has demonstrated, the movement might blame donors, but the public ultimately blames Hamas for its failure to govern and deliver. Indeed, while Hamas remains firmly in control of Gaza, three wars with Israel, economic hardship, and a government rife with corruption have eroded the movement's popularity.

As a result of such trends, some Hamas leaders have suggested discomfort with the decision to participate in the elections. The movement has therefore remained vague on the nature of its participation. Statements by some Hamas leaders indicate that it might not field its own candidates but rather support "qualified, technocratic" candidates. The movement has previously pursued such a tactic, which allows it to benefit from the tribal standing or professional reputation enjoyed by such independent candidates while avoiding the liability Hamas members would incur due to the movement's international isolation and waning public support.

Fatah and the Cost of Political Stagnation

The challenges faced by Fatah include being deeply fragmented and lacking any sense of political renewal. In the 2012 municipal elections, and despite the Hamas boycott, official Fatah lists in some municipalities lost to

competitors from within the movement who felt marginalized by the Fatah official apparatus and ran on alternative lists. Since then, Fatah divisions have only deepened. Jockeying to succeed the aging, unpopular PA president, Mahmoud Abbas, has taken center stage in Fatah politics. In such a context, aspiring successors will likely use the municipal elections to demonstrate their support base. Some indications already suggest that certain Fatah leaders are considering fielding independent lists in West Bank areas such as Nablus and Tulkarem.

Elections in Gaza present an additional challenge for Fatah -- namely, in the figure of Abbas archrival Mohammad Dahlan, a Fatah leader from Gaza who, while expelled from the movement and currently living in exile, maintains a solid base of support within the movement's Gaza-based activists. Although the Fatah leadership may be able to prevent Dahlan-affiliated candidates from running in the West Bank, it cannot do so in Gaza. A Dahlan-Hamas alliance -- floated by some commentators -- in which Hamas enables Dahlan supporters to win some seats could spell a resounding defeat for the official Fatah list and cement Dahlan's standing, an outcome anathema to Abbas and many other Fatah leaders.

Scenarios

Given these challenges, a successful municipal election is not the only -- or necessarily the most likely -- scenario. Instead, each side has already started positioning itself to blame the other in case elections are canceled or invalidated. Since Hamas announced its decision to allow the vote, media affiliated with both sides have wasted no time in alleging irregularities and harassment of their respective members.

According to conventional wisdom, Hamas's willingness to allow these elections in the first place may stem from the movement's confidence that it will do well, given the weakness, unpopularity, and organizational chaos of its Fatah rivals. Some Hamas-affiliated analysts have hinted that the movement was also concerned that preventing municipal elections would further erode its standing. What is clear, though, is that Hamas is trying to position itself for a win-win situation. If, as the election date draws closer and the outcome becomes easier to predict, Hamas feels confident it will do well, it can proceed and claim victory. If in such a scenario the PA decides to cancel the elections, Hamas will benefit politically. If, alternatively, Hamas senses a coming defeat, it can use Israel- and PA-imposed limitations on its activity in the West Bank as a pretext to pull out and cancel elections in Gaza.

For its part, the Fatah-dominated PA, when it announced municipal elections, probably expected a repeat of the 2012 vote, in which Fatah ran uncontested. It was hoping to claim the elections as an act of democratic rejuvenation while attacking Hamas for preventing them in Gaza. With Hamas's decision to participate, Fatah finds itself potentially facing serious challenges. As implied, it too may opt to cancel or indefinitely postpone the vote, as some Fatah officials have privately stated, citing Israeli interference or the inevitable Hamas limitations on Fatah activities in Gaza.

But canceling or invalidating the election results represents a risky strategy for both parties. For such an approach to succeed, public opinion would need to accept Hamas or Fatah's reasoning for these actions. After close to a decade of mutual accusations between the two parties, the public's faith in both is low. A decision to cancel the elections would likely only exacerbate this lack of faith, deepening the national political crisis.

The Role of External Actors

As mentioned above, a main Hamas vulnerability is its international isolation. To counter this image, the movement will likely intensify its visible regional -- and, where possible, international -- activities and encourage friendly countries, particularly Qatar and Turkey, to increase their support to the Gaza Strip. Hamas is already pointing to the Qatari decision to pay a full month's salary to the movement's Gaza-based employees as proof it can deliver. It will also likely highlight some of the humanitarian projects agreed to between Israel and Turkey as part of the countries' recent detente, as well as current debates in Israel regarding building a Gaza port, to argue that its

international isolation is easing.

Conclusion

For the upcoming vote, the United States and other donor countries should reiterate clearly and vocally their existing laws and policies regarding financial support to municipalities to which Hamas members are elected. Such clarifications are bound to be branded by Hamas as interference in the election process, but they are necessary to factually inform voters of the consequences of their choices. Beyond this and routine support for the Central Elections Commission, there is little the international community can or should do.

Whereas some observers see Hamas's consent to participate as a potentially dramatic move that could inject energy into Palestinian politics and even presage the much-delayed national elections, this optimistic view must contend with a challenging reality. Nothing indicates, since the 2006 parliamentary elections, that either Hamas or Fatah is willing to engage in any conciliatory politics or allow shared governance in its areas of control. Both movements face their own distinct challenges and vulnerabilities. If past experience is any guide, neither faction is likely to allow a politically damaging process to reach its conclusion. Instead, one side may well find an excuse to cancel the elections in areas under its control. In such a political game of chicken, the main question becomes who blinks first.

Without a political solution to the deeper issues underlying the divisions in Palestinian politics, as well as to those creating general paralysis in the Palestinian polity, the proposed municipal vote could create a scenario that further entrenches divisions and deepens the overall political crisis.

Ghaith al-Omari, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, previously served in various advisory positions with the Palestinian Authority. ❖

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