

What Abbas's PLO Resignation Means

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Brief Analysis

The president's sudden departure from the PLO executive committee was likely a maneuver to consolidate power, but it nonetheless exposes broader uncertainties in Palestinian politics.

On August 22, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas resigned from his position as chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) executive committee, along with nine other committee members. While initially interpreted by commentators as the implementation of Abbas's repeated threats to resign as leader of the key Palestinian institutions, developments so far indicate that, rather than signaling Abbas's departure from Palestinian political life, this step is intended to consolidate his power within the PLO by removing some of his critics and appointing loyalists to the committee.

Background

The executive committee, the PLO's highest decisionmaking body, is composed of eighteen members elected by the Palestinian National Council (PNC). The current committee, which was elected in 2009, includes representatives of all the PLO's constituent factions as well as a number of independents.

For its part, the PNC is often described as the PLO's "legislative body." It officially consists of 800 members, but only about 700 of these remained the last time the PNC met for a special session in 2009. Most PNC members reside outside the West Bank and Gaza, and many of the diaspora members oppose the principles of the Oslo Accords and President Abbas's policies.

According to PLO regulations, if fewer than a third of the committee's seats become vacant, the vacancies are filled during the next regular PNC session. (Even as a special session was held in 2009, the last regular PNC session hasn't occurred since 1996.) If more than a third become vacant, then the vacancies are filled in a special session to be held within thirty days. For both regular and special PNC sessions, two-thirds of members constitute a quorum. In cases

of force majeure, vacancies are filled in an emergency session by "the Executive Committee, the PNC leadership and any PNC members who are able to attend" without the need for a quorum.

The resignation of President Abbas and his nine committee colleagues is intended to create the vacancies needed to trigger new committee elections. Since most of the diaspora and Gaza-based PNC members will be unable to attend if the meeting is held in Ramallah, an emergency session will likely be attended predominantly by West Bank members and some from Jordan.

This move comes in the wake of various recent measures against critics of President Abbas, including the July removal of Yasser Abed Rabbo from his position as the committee's secretary-general, the closing of the Palestinian Peace Coalition, an NGO chaired by Abed Rabbo, the targeting of former prime minister Salam Fayyad's NGO, Future for Palestine, and ongoing measures against former Fatah official and Abbas rival Mohammad Dahlan. It also coincides with recent expressions of disquiet within the Fatah movement.

Although Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) are not members of the PLO, according to the 2012 Cairo agreement on Palestinian national unity, a committee will be created to reform the PLO, including reforming the PNC to include Hamas and PIJ members. This committee, however, has been inactive.

Implications

If President Abbas's strategy comes to fruition, then a new executive committee is likely to be elected that would include some current members, among them Abbas himself and some of those who resigned, but exclude the president's critics. This move is already generating controversy, with Abbas and the move's supporters claiming it is intended to "invigorate the committee" and opponents asserting it is an "arbitrary move...meant for asserting control over it." Opposition is likely to come from two main quarters: within the PLO and Hamas.

A number of the committee's members have refused to resign, and thereby comply with Abbas's plan, most notably representatives of left-leaning factions and some independents. Senior members of these factions have publicly criticized the gesture. While leftist factions enjoy only a limited public following, their opposition is significant in that it breaks the PLO's tradition of reaching decisions by consensus.

In addition to political opposition, the move's opponents are preparing to challenge it on a key point of procedure. They assert that PLO regulations authorize a PNC emergency session only to fill vacancies; thus, those members who refused to resign cannot be replaced. Ultimately, the decision on this point belongs to PNC president Salim Zanoun, who was the PNC's vice president beginning in 1969 and has been its president since 1994. While he is a member of Abbas's Fatah movement, he has in the past acted unpredictably and broken ranks with both the late PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and President Abbas.

Hamas has rejected the move, describing it as a breach of the Cairo unity agreement. This reaction, however, is only preliminary and is consistent with the organization's continuing rhetoric against Abbas and the PA. The organization's final decision is yet to come and will be dictated by a number of considerations.

For Hamas, this development comes at an interesting time, when the movement is attempting to assert itself as an independent actor in the regional and international arena and amid reports of efforts to reach a long-term ceasefire understanding with Israel. If Hamas feels that its efforts are gaining sufficient momentum, it may deem it in its interest to use this development to justify formally annulling the unity agreement with the PLO. If not, then it will content itself with having yet another rhetorical tool against Abbas.

Conclusion

Reports of President Abbas's political demise may be premature. His and his colleagues' recent resignations from the PLO executive committee are likely internal political maneuvers aimed at consolidating power. However,

given the fluidity of the domestic and regional political scene, unexpected consequences cannot be discounted.

Whatever the outcome, these developments have once again exposed the many uncertainties that plague Palestinian politics as it relates to Abbas's succession, the competition over domestic and international legitimacy between the PLO and Hamas, and transparency and procedural and political predictability of decisionmaking within Palestinian institutions. Unless these uncertainties are addressed through comprehensive political and institutional reforms, the Palestinian political system will remain vulnerable to crises that hold the risk of creating destabilizing power or institutional vacuums.

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