

Fatah's Prospects in the Legislative Elections

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Brief Analysis

Polling and political dynamics point to Fatah losing control of the Palestinian legislature after January 25 elections.

With just over two weeks left before January 25 Palestinian legislative elections, the mainstream Fatah movement remains bitterly divided, with some of its key factions advocating the postponement of elections and others demanding that voting be held as scheduled. Having publicly aired its internal problems over the last weeks rather than developing a clear campaign message, Fatah is unlikely to win more than 40 percent of the seats in the next Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Even though the question of Israel allowing voting in East Jerusalem now seems resolved, it remains to be seen whether elections will take place. If they do proceed, Fatah is certain to lose its monopoly on the Palestinian Authority and will require a coalition to form the next government.

Fatah's Deep Divisions

Unable to agree on the composition of its national list, Fatah registered two national lists in the last hour before the December 14 deadline -- one under Fatah's name, and the other, called al-Mustaqbal ("the future"), headed by the imprisoned Marwan Barghouti, his followers, and former preventive security chiefs Mohammad Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub. But with Fatah facing a serious challenge from Hamas in the elections, the dim prospects of winning with a split list led to a compromise and a court decision allowing Fatah to present a single national list on January 25.

The most obvious limitation of Fatah's electoral position is its old guard's opposition to allowing elections at all, since they will empower a new leadership and undermine the old guard's authority. The Fatah list includes three members of the Fatah Central Committee in the top five slots despite the compromise that created the list, which mandated

that members of Fatah's Central Committee and Revolutionary Council, as well as sitting legislative council members, run in their districts rather than on the national list.

More indicative of the old guard's opposition to elections is the withdrawal of Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qurei and PLC speaker Rawhi Fatouh, who were initially given top slots on the Fatah list. Qurei himself has openly opposed holding elections on the grounds that Israel was forbidding balloting in Jerusalem; other Fatah Central Committee members have publicly criticized holding elections at this juncture. Without the backing of the key decisionmaking apparatus within Fatah, the party is left unable to develop a clear platform or a national electoral strategy, and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas has not assumed such a role.

Another Fatah faction largely opposed to elections despite the candidacy of some of its members is the militant Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which is behind the recent spree of violent incidents including the kidnapping of foreign aid workers, the seizure of the border terminal in Rafah, the destruction of part of the border wall in Gaza and the ensuing death of two Egyptian soldiers, and the seizure of election offices and the disruption of balloting during Fatah primaries. The Al-Aqsa Brigades represent localized gangs rather than a united national group, and their destructive activities suggest the backing of patrons opposed to the elections.

More than 130 Fatah members who want to distance themselves from the problems within the party are running as independents in their districts. Because half of the PLC's 132 seats are determined by district-based voting for individual candidates, these independents will split the votes of Fatah members for these 66 seats. Other key Fatah personalities, such as Ahmed Hilles, a Fatah Revolutionary Council member who enjoys wide support in Gaza City, are not running because of disagreements over the formation of Fatah's list. The inability of Fatah to include all of its key national and local figures on its lists and limit the number of Fatah members running as independents will greatly damage its ability to mobilize the diverse range of Fatah voters.

Calculating Fatah's Potential Seats

Taking the total number of votes Abbas received during the presidential election of January 2005 as a baseline, Fatah's voting potential is 500,000 voters. Based on this estimation, the maximum number of nationally determined seats Fatah could win would be thirty out of sixty-six, or 45 percent. (The latest poll conducted by Khalil Shikaki's Palestinian Center for Survey Research indicated Fatah's national list would receive 43 percent of the vote.)

A more realistic scenario, given the divisions within Fatah, the disillusionment with the current state of the Palestinian Authority, and the fact that some voters who elected Abbas are likely to vote for independent lists, suggests that Fatah would receive more like 350,000 votes, which -- depending on turnout -- could translate into something like twenty-one nationally determined seats.

Fatah's performance in the districts is harder to predict, given the greater importance of the identity of individual candidates, but several factors suggest Fatah's district-based candidates will perform even more weakly than the party's national list. There are a handful of probable Fatah winners in the districts, based on their local popularity, their performance in the primaries, and their affiliation with dominant families, but many of Fatah's local candidates are tainted with charges of corruption and are too closely affiliated with the failings of the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, in the last round of municipal elections, Hamas won 73 percent of the votes in Nablus and gained strong support in other West Bank cities where it traditionally lacked influence. As the only organized alternative to Fatah in the districts, Hamas will be competitive in Gaza and many localities in the West Bank; Hamas's local candidates will fare better than its national list. Therefore, it seems more probable that Fatah would win just thirteen district-based seats in the West Bank and eight in Gaza, totaling twenty-one of sixty-six directly elected seats, or 32 percent.

In all, Fatah is unlikely to win many more than 50 of the PLC's 132 seats. That may be enough for Fatah to become the largest party, but it would not be close to the absolute majority (67 seats) necessary to approve a cabinet.

Consequently, the effectiveness of Fatah's bloc will depend on whether it can attract independents and retain the support of its own members. Hamas will likely finish closely behind (or possibly even exceed Fatah) and will exert considerable influence in the next PLC.

Prospect for Postponing Elections

Because of Fatah's poor electoral outlook, many Fatah members have declared a preference for delaying elections. Nominally, the excuse for such a delay had been Israel's preference not to permit elections in Jerusalem. However, Israel has belatedly allowed campaigning in Jerusalem by candidates who do not belong to "extremist groups," and acting prime minister Ehud Olmert reportedly informed U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice that Palestinians in East Jerusalem will be able to vote.

The real threat to conducting elections on time is the increasing lawlessness and the growing number of violent incidents in both Gaza and the West Bank, particularly attacks targeting election officials. If the chaos of the Fatah primaries, with numerous altercations at polling places and subsequent seizures of election offices, is any indication of how the national elections will proceed, armed disruptions are highly likely to jeopardize election day. And unlike in the primaries where the process continued in districts free of violence, it will be impossible to count national votes fairly if balloting at even one polling station is disrupted. Palestinian interior minister Nasser Yousef has already admitted that his forces will be unable to secure polling places. To ensure the smooth conduct of elections, Palestinian security officials should impose and enforce a moratorium on public displays and uses of weapons in advance of the elections. If they are unable to control the streets in advance of January 25, it is unlikely that balloting will proceed without incident.

Abbas and Fatah have little leverage over Hamas to get them to agree to a delay, given Fatah's electoral weakness, Hamas's threat to resume attacks against Israel, and the organization's ability to further undermine the Palestinian Authority in Gaza. Should elections be delayed without a compromise, the Palestinian security situation will likely devolve further and Hamas may resume attacks against Israel that have been largely suspended over the last year. Such a development will signal the failure, before the process could even begin, of Abbas's attempt to moderate Hamas by incorporating it into the Palestinian system.

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