

Democracy in the West bank and Gaza; Much more than elections

By Dr. Yara Hawari

On the 26th September, the Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas renewed his pledge to hold parliamentary elections in a speech at the UN general assembly and called for an international presence to monitor the process. Abbas has been sporadically talking about elections since the beginning of the year, many of his critics arguing that this is an attempt to pay lip service to the voices calling for democratisation in the occupied territories of 1967. Indeed when he became President in 2005, Abbas initially had a four year presidential term. At the time of writing, he has exceeded his electoral mandate by a decade and his governing by presidential decrees as well as the increasing authoritarianism of the PA has left many questioning his sincerity for real democracy.

Many argue that the calls for elections are an attempt for the PA to renew its legitimacy at a time when its approval ratings are in the gutter and its position on the global diplomatic stage is the most vulnerable it has ever been. Certainly, the internal and external pressure for an electoral process is at an all-time high. Yet whilst international actors are keen for elections to forge ahead as quickly as possible, various Palestinian political factions have been calling on Abbas to hold a national meeting to agree on a variety of issues before the date of the elections are set. Abbas, however has thus far rejected the call to have a national meeting ahead of the announcement of parliamentary elections and rather ironically will likely go ahead with elections through presidential decree. Crucially, and surprising many within Fatah, Hamas has approved of holding both legislative and presidential elections. The remaining obstacle remains the issue of holding elections in East Jerusalem.

Abbas has stated previously that elections would not take place unless they also take place in the Palestinian capital and indeed the PA submitted an official request that the Israeli authorities permit this. There is yet to be an official response from the Israelis, but in general they repress PA political activity in Jerusalem arguing that the Oslo Interim agreement forbids it. The repression of political activity extends beyond PA and includes the arresting of political figures and activists as well as the shutting down of Palestinian cultural institutions. It is unlikely that any Israeli government would permit Palestinian elections in Jerusalem to take place, to do so would acknowledge legitimate Palestinian presence in the city and therefore challenge the Israeli claim of sovereignty over the entire city. Abbas and other officials including Saeb Erekat, have made it clear that the issue of Jerusalem could prevent the elections from taking place entirely.



Yet whilst all these political theatrics are taking place, a wider discussion on Palestinian democracy is being overshadowed. Whilst elections may seem like an important democratic process, this paper argues that in the case of the West Bank and Gaza, elections within the current status quo would actually be antithetical to democracy. Indeed they would simply prop up a system which does not allow for democratic space not does it truly seek to produce a democratic and representative leadership.

It is pertinent to discuss here what is meant by democracy and democratic practice beyond the traditional images of ancient Greece. Democracy is usually defined as a form of governance in which there is a representative and accountable leadership. Schmitter and Karl define it as follows;

Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives.

Notably this definition highlights 'citizenship' as an essential part of democracies as it dictates who can take part in the system and who cannot. Thus it serves both as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. There are many types of democracies with varied practices depending on the particular country or state's social, political and economic context. Socialist approaches to democracy are seen through the regulation and collective ownership of property whilst liberal approaches "advocates circumscribing the public realm as narrowly as possible." Importantly, democracies are expected to promote democratic practice (including political plurality) in all areas of society not simply in governmental institutions.

This is an important point to note because there is a dangerous assumption made by many (particularly in the case of the West Bank and Gaza) that elections are interchangeable with democracy. This is not the case, whilst elections are a very technical practice than may well be a product of a meaningful democratic process and culture, but may also take part in a society where democratic characteristics are lacking or are absent entirely. Indeed democratic elections have to be part of a package in which democracy exists across

society and where political plurality is accepted and encouraged. A cursory overview of the West Bank and Gaza reveals this not to be the case, in reality there exists two authorities operating under increasingly authoritarian governance.

A historical overview of Palestinian leadership and democratic practice

Palestinians have never had a space truly free of external interventions to practice democracy. From the British Mandate to the State of Israel, both colonial regimes have imposed repressive measures against Palestinian politics and democratic expressions. Yet Palestinians have consistently tried to reclaim their political agency despite the repressive circumstances. The takeover of the PLO in 1969 by Fatah was one of the first major Palestinian exercises in democratic action. The PLO had been established by the Arab states largely in an attempt to co-opt the Palestinian liberation struggle. The takeover brought in an era of political pluralism and incorporated not just political parties but also unions and various other groups. At the same time whilst there was an increase in democratic practice, there were issues with top-down methods of confirming representatives as well as an over representation of the diaspora elites.

This reformed PLO, headed by Chairman Yasser Arafat, was considered a serious threat by the State of Israel and there were consistent attempts to marginalise and undermine it. In 1976 for example, municipal elections across the West Bank were imposed by the Israeli authorities to create autonomous administrative areas that would negotiate directly with the occupation authorities. The Israeli occupation administration hope to install local leaders that would substitute and undermine the authority of the PLO (which was still in exile) as the representative of the Palestinians. A weekly magazine called *al Hadaaf*, noted that the Israeli regime was giving Palestinians the façade of autonomy within the framework of the Israeli state. Yet these elections did the opposite of what the Israeli regime had hoped, they saw the election of PLO friendly representatives, consolidating their legitimacy in the eyes of the people on the ground in the West bank and Gaza.

Palestinian political democracy reached its peak in the 1980s and early 1990s during the First Intifa-

da. George Bisharat describes it as follows;

The Palestinian people's most democratic movement- a true upswelling of grassroots sentiment and activism that momentarily shifted the political initiative out of the hands of the diaspora elders and political fixers and into the hands of a youthful decentralised leadership in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The mobilisation during this period was being led by a unified leadership of civil society groups and others working to disrupt the Israeli regime. Indeed various unions, student groups, cooperatives and popular committees consolidated a revolutionary consensus to form a 'people's authority'. Linda Tabar explains that this "Palestinian people's power centred on creating new structures that could provide an alternative to capitalist economic exploitation and patriarchal domination". The First Intifada was also a period in which women were forcing their way into political and mobilising spaces that had been previously dominated by men. Yet whilst the period showed promising signs of a practised revolutionary democracy, it quickly unravelled with the onset of the Oslo Accords. The quelling of the First Intifada and the ushering in of negotiations between the PLO and Israel began a process of de-politicisation and democratisation of the Palestinian struggle.

Oslo saw the establishment PA which was to serve as an interim government whilst the foundations of a Palestinian State would be laid. Meanwhile donor aid flooded the West Bank and Gaza under the auspices of institution building and the promotion of democracy. Yet the focus on consolidating neoliberal policies as well as strengthening the security apparatus not only reveals a deeply entrenched donor agenda, but also what Leila Farsakh describes as a "de-democratisation" process. Farsakh argues that this is as a result of the deliberate side-lining of "political parties, the parliamentary institutions, trade unions, (and) popular committees" in favour of NGOs as well as the pursuit of a "neo-liberal agenda that makes the market the central agent of change".

The international/ donor prioritisation of the PA over the PLO, as well as internal political factors which contributed to the marginalisation of the PLO, meant that the former supplanted the latter. Yet Unlike the Palestinian liberation Organisation

(the PLO) which gained popular legitimacy as the representative of the Palestinian people in all their geographic, social and political fragments, the PA is only responsible for Palestinian populations in the West Bank and Gaza. In other words, the creation of the PA led to the deliberate limiting of Palestine and the Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza. Fata's control of the PA only increased feelings of disenfranchisement, in addition to the mismanagement and corruption that only seemed to get worse.

The reaction to this was the election of Hamas in a landslide victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza expressed their dissatisfaction with the ruling regime through the ballot box. This expression would soon be rejected by the international community who imposed sanctions on the PA which included the suspension of aid to Palestinians. Subsequent battle between Fatah and Gaza ensued which eventually resulted in Fatah being expelled and a military siege being imposed on the coastal strip which continues to this day.

Concluding remarks

The space for democratic and political practice in the West Bank and Gaza has since been shrinking. The monopolisation of Fatah over the PA and the PLO in the West Bank (and by Hamas in Gaza), as well as the consolidation of power by Abbas and his closest allies has led to the solidification of a one party system. In order to maintain this consolidation of power, the PA has become increasingly authoritarian by frequently repressing political opposition including journalists and student activists. As well as local human rights organisations reporting on this, Human Rights Watch published a report on the Palestinian authorities which stated the following;

...in recent years carried out scores of arbitrary arrests for peaceful criticism of the authorities, particularly on social media, among independent journalists, on university campuses, and at demonstrations. As the Fatah-Hamas feud deepened despite attempts at reconciliation, PA security services have targeted supporters of Hamas and vice versa. Relying primarily on overly broad laws that criminalize activity such as causing "sectarian strife" or insulting "higher authorities," the PA and Hamas use detention to punish critics

and deter them and others from further activism.

The criminalisation of other political parties by the international community such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) has also contributed to the overall atmosphere of political repression. It is in within this context of limited democratic and political space that we have to think about elections in the West Bank and Gaza. Elections could be held and conducted in a technically free and fair manner, passing the standards of international observers and standards (which was requested by Abbas at the UNGA). Yet the lack of political competition and plurality means that they would not embody a reflection of true and meaningful democratic practice. Writing about what a meaningful electoral process would look like in the West Bank and Gaza, Tariq Da'na comments that;

For the electoral process to be meaningful and productive, it must take place in a healthy environment where basic democratic criteria are integrated into the structure of national institutions, the political party system, civil society, the education system, and the general cultural framework.

In other words, democracy has to be exercised in a more wholistic manner for elections to constitute as real democratic practice otherwise they simply reinforce the ruling regime.

The reaction to the 2006 elections, for many Palestinians, showed what happens when they decide on a leadership that challenges the political agenda of the Israeli regime and the international donor community. Moreover, the aftermath led to a seemingly impenetrable divide between Hamas and Fatah that continues to this day. The process of elections without reconciliation will only feed each side with opportunities to blame the other for failings.

It is thus unsurprising that there is little confidence in an electoral process. This requires us to think about what kind of democracy is possible under occupation. The Israeli regime has demonstrated consistently that it will crush Palestinian expressions of democracy that challenge the occupation and the status quo which relies on a subordinate Palestinian leadership. Moreover, within this context it is clear that the PA will not achieve Palestinian liberation, nor will it be able to establish any kind of Palestinian sovereignty. The

only possibility for meaningful democracy for Palestinians is a return to a revolutionary consensus achieved from plurality and reconciliation of political groups, geographic fragments and collectives that mobilise around a political agenda of liberation. Without romanticising or idealising the past, Palestinians must build on collective experiences of democratic expression and practices that go beyond the current limited framework of elections.

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Yara Hawari is the Senior Palestine Policy Fellow of Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network. She completed her PhD in Middle East Politics at the University of Exeter. Her research focused on oral history projects and memory politics, framed more widely within Indigenous Studies. Yara taught various undergraduate courses at the University of Exeter and continues to work as a freelance journalist, publishing for various media outlets, including Al Jazeera English, Middle East Eye and the Independent.
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Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine & Jordan

Responsible: Ute Beuck

Al Tireh St. / Nile St., Attari Bld #67, 2nd floor, (Opposite of the Chinese Embassy), Ramallah, Palestine

Phone: +972 297 3302/06/46

Fax: +972 297 3345

Email: info.ramallah@rosalux.org

www.rosaluxemburg.ps

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