COMMENTARY | POLITICS

Democracy in the West Bank and Gaza: More than Elections

By: Yara Hawari · February, 2020

Introduction

Last September, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas renewed his pledge to hold parliamentary elections and called for an international presence to monitor the process. Abbas has spoken sporadically of elections since the beginning of 2019, and many of his critics argue that he is simply paying lip service to the voices calling for democratization in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Indeed, when Abbas became president in 2005, he had a four-year presidential term. At the time of writing, he has exceeded his electoral mandate by over a decade, and his strategy of governing by presidential decree as well as the PA's increasing authoritarianism have left many questioning his sincerity when he speaks of Palestinian democracy.

One can argue that the calls for elections are the PA's attempt to renew its legitimacy at a time when its approval ratings are abysmal and its position on the global diplomatic stage 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, various Palestinian political factions have called on Abbas to hold a national meeting to agree on a variety of issues before setting a date. Abbas, however, has thus far rejected this call, and rather ironically will likely go ahead with elections through

presidential decree. Crucially, and surprising many within Fatah, Hamas has approved holding both legislative and presidential elections. The remaining obstacle is the issue of holding elections in East Jerusalem.

Abbas has stated that elections will not take place unless they do so in the Palestinian capital, and the PA submitted an official request to the Israeli authorities in this regard. The Israelis have not yet responded, but in general Israel represses PA political activity in Jerusalem, citing the claim of Israeli sovereignty over the entire city. This repression extends beyond the PA to the arrest of political figures and activists as well as closures of Palestinian cultural institutions. It is unlikely that any Israeli government would permit Palestinian elections in Jerusalem, as to do so would acknowledge legitimate Palestinian presence in the city and therefore challenge the Israeli claim of sovereignty over the entire metropolis. Abbas and other officials, including Saeb Erekat, have said that the issue of Jerusalem could prevent the elections from taking place.

The above political theatrics overshadow a wider discussion on Palestinian democracy. Whilst elections may seem like an important democratic process, holding elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip given the current status quo would be antithetical to democracy. Indeed, they would simply prop up a system that does not allow for democratic space and that does not seek to produce a democratic and representative leadership.

This commentary considers the elements of meaningful democracy and traces Palestinians' history of democratic leadership and practice. It argues that Palestinians, without idealizing the past, must draw from earlier experiences to achieve liberation – a process that far surpasses the proposed elections.

Palestinian Elections: Antithetical to Democracy

Democracy is usually defined as a form of governance with a representative and

accountable leadership. Schmitter and Karl define it in the following terms: "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 democracy, as it dictates who can take part in the system. Thus citizenship serves simultaneously as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. There are many types of democracies with practices that vary in accordance with the particular social, political, historical, and economic conditions characterizing the state. The regulation and collective ownership of property typify socialist approaches to democracy, whilst liberal approaches "advocate circumscribing the public realm as narrowly as possible."

Democracies are also expected to promote democratic practice, including political plurality, not only in governmental institutions but in all areas of society. This is an important point because many make the dangerous assumption, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, that elections are interchangeable with democracy. This is not the case: Whilst elections are a technical practice or procedure that may well be a product of a meaningful democratic process and culture, they may also be part of a society in which democratic characteristics are lacking or absent. Indeed, democratic elections must be part of a larger package in which democratic accountability 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: rather, two authorities operate increasingly as authoritarian police states in the context of an increasingly militarized settler colonial regime.

A History of Palestinian Leadership and Democratic Practice

Palestinians have never had a space truly free of external intervention to practice

democracy. From the Ottoman Empire to the British Mandate to the state of Israel, imperial and colonial regimes have imposed repressive measures against Palestinian politics and democratic expression. Despite these circumstances, Palestinians have consistently tried to reclaim their political agency. Fatah's takeover of the PLO in 1969 was one of the first major Palestinian exercises in democratic action. The Arab states had established the PLO 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 other groups. At the same time, whilst an increase in democratic practice occurred, there was dissatisfaction with Yasser Arafat's increasingly authoritarian methods of appointing and confirming representatives as well as an overrepresentation of diaspora elites – although this was perhaps an inevitable occurrence considering that the PLO was mostly a manifestation of refugees in exile.

Israel considered this reformed PLO, headed by Arafat, a serious threat, and attempted to marginalize and undermine it. In 1976, for example, the Israeli authorities imposed municipal elections across the West Bank to create autonomous administrative areas that would negotiate directly with the occupation authorities. The Israeli occupation administration hoped to install local leaders who would substitute and undermine the authority of the still-in-exile PLO as the representative of the Palestinians. The Popular Front for the Liberation for Palestine's weekly magazine, *Al Hadaf*, 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 resulted in the election of PLO-friendly representatives, consolidating the PLO's 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 Intifada. George Bisharat describes it as

[t]he 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 decentralized leadership in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

A unified leadership of civil society groups and others working to disrupt the Israeli regime led the mobilization during this period. 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 centered 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 intensified their work of forcing their way into political and mobilizing spaces previously dominated by men. Yet whilst the period showed promising signs of a practiced 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-politicization of the Palestinian struggle.

Oslo saw the establishment of the PA, which was to serve as an interim government and the embryo of a Palestinian state in the making. With meager ability to raise its own funds, the PA was largely financed through donor aid, which flooded the West Bank and Gaza under the auspices of institution building and the promotion of democracy. Yet the aid's real focus – consolidating neoliberal policies and strengthening the PA's security apparatus – not only revealed a deeply entrenched donor agenda, but also illustrated what Leila Farsakh describes as a "de-democratization" process. Farsakh argues that this process is a result of the deliberate sidelining of "political parties, the parliamentary institutions, trade unions, [and] popular committees" in favor of NGOs as well as the pursuit of a "neo-liberal agenda that makes the market the central agent of change."

The international/donor prioritization of the PA over the PLO, as well as internal political factors that contributed to the marginalization of the PLO, meant that the former supplanted the latter. Yet unlike 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 Strip. In other words, the creation of the PA led to the deliberate limiting of Palestine and the Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza, which has led to the disenfranchisement of Palestinians elsewhere. Yet Fatah's increasing control over the PA, as well as its mismanagement, corruption, and systematic erosion of democratic rights have also amplified feelings of political exclusion within the areas it supposedly administers.

The victory of Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections was a reaction to the untenable situation created by the Oslo regime. Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza expressed their dissatisfaction with the Fatah-controlled PA through the ballot box. This expression was immediately rejected by the international community, who imposed sanctions on the PA that extended to the thorough suspension of aid to Palestinians. The subsequent battle between Fatah and Hamas ensued, resulting in Fatah being expelled from Gaza and a military siege imposed on the coastal strip that continues to this day.

Building Real Democracy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

The space for democratic and political practice in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has been shrinking. Fatah's monopolization of the PA and the PLO in the West Bank (and Hamas's parallel monopolization in Gaza), as well as the consolidation of power by Abbas and his closest allies have led to the entrenchment of a one-party system. To maintain this monopoly on political power, the PA has become increasingly authoritarian by frequently repressing political opposition, including journalists and student activists. In 2018 Human Rights Watch, putting forth

analysis similar to that of local human rights organizations, published a report explaining how the Palestinian authorities

…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 international community's criminalization of other political parties, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), has also contributed to the atmosphere of political repression. It is in within this context of limited democratic and political space that we must consider elections in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Elections could be held and conducted in a technically free and fair manner, passing the standards of international observers. Yet the lack of political competition and plurality means that the elections would not reflect true democratic practice. As Tariq Dana has commented,

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 must be exercised in a more holistic manner for elections to constitute as real democratic practice; otherwise, they simply reinforce the ruling regime.

For many Palestinians the reaction to the 2006 elections showed what happens when they decide on a leadership that challenges the political agenda of the

Israeli regime and the international donor community. Further, the aftermath led to a seemingly impenetrable divide between Hamas and Fatah. Elections without reconciliation will only supply each side with opportunities to blame the other for failings.

It is thus unsurprising that Palestinians have 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 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 establish any kind of Palestinian sovereignty.

The only possibility for meaningful democracy for Palestinians is a return to a revolutionary consensus achieved through plurality and reconciliation of political groups, geographic fragments, and collectives that mobilize around a political agenda of liberation. Without romanticizing or idealizing 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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