PODCAST

Reflections on Palestinian Local Elections with Fadi Quran

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, Fadi Quran · April, 2022

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Fadi Quran 0:00

I think Palestinian society at large, particularly the younger generation who are more hopeful, are moving towards that big picture. We want Palestine liberated. We want all Palestinians liberated no matter where they are, and we're willing to sacrifice and find ways to engage to achieve that goal.

Yara Hawari 0:23

This is Rethinking Palestine, a podcast from Al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network. We are a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis wherever you are in the world.

Last month, the final round of Palestinian municipal elections took place in the 1967 territories. The first round happened on the 11th of December 2021 in 376 mostly rural local authorities in the West Bank. The second round was on the 26th of March 2022 and included the remaining 66 local authorities in Gaza and larger

municipalities in the West Bank.

Now, these elections followed the list system, in which electors vote for one of several lists of candidates, and each list is granted seats in proportion to the number of popular votes it receives. The last local elections took place in 2017, and in the West Bank only, following an official boycott by Hamas, the ruling party in Gaza.

These latest elections also come after the cancellation of legislative and presidential elections by PA President Mahmoud Abbas in May 2021, who is now nearly a decade and a half past his elected mandate.

Joining me to discuss this is Al-Shabaka policy member and Avaaz campaign director Fadi Quran. Fadi, thank you for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Fadi Quran 2:10

It's a pleasure to be here with you, Yara, and I'm excited for the conversation.

Yara Hawari 2:15

Fadi, perhaps you can start off by telling us about the municipalities. What do they do? Why are they important? And what power do they actually hold?

Fadi Quran 2:24

Well, this is a great question, because there are, I'd say, two philosophies around Palestinian municipalities. On one hand, municipalities do what town halls do everywhere — which is to make sure the infrastructure is taken care of, make sure that streets are clean, make sure that licenses for buildings are handed out, some urban planning. And there is, particularly within the Fatah and Palestinian Authority leadership, this kind of push for municipalities to just be that: service providers that take care of logistical issues related to the cities they're in.

But historically in Palestine, municipalities have also had a very political, very patriotic role, because part of the struggle for Palestine is a struggle over land. And if you look at the First Intifada, for example, municipalities were the only places where Palestinians had some level of representation — where Palestinians could choose who spoke for them.

And so municipal leaders and councils would often take a position of what's known as positive steadfastness and adopt policies to increase people's cultural awareness about the political challenges that they face, and protect certain land against settlement expansion, and play that type of role of not just taking care of the logistical needs of people, but actually providing a vision and resisting against Israel's attempts at encroachment.

And today, in the elections that happened, those two aspects of the roles of municipalities are kind of clashing — where there's an attempt to push it simply towards the logistical, apolitical, but many municipalities under threat from the occupation are seeking to move in a broader direction of steadfastness.

Yara Hawari 4:13

So why do some political parties boycott the elections?

Fadi Quran 4:17

Well, there are different reasons, I would say, across political parties. So some political parties, like Hamas for example, have in some elections participated in the municipal elections and then in other elections refused to do so. They refused, or boycotted, the last elections largely because they're being politically suffocated. They're being targeted. And so essentially, they made the decision that if we run, we're going to be arrested, our members are going to pay a high price, whether by Israel or the Palestinian Authority. So we're just going to boycott them because this is not a real democratic process when we can't openly campaign.

Other political parties, like let's say Islamic Jihad, have a more foundational opinion — a dogmatic opinion — in terms of municipal elections that simply says these are all part of the Oslo process, the Oslo creation, and we don't want to legitimize Oslo and this functionality. And so we're not going to engage in municipalities.

And then there's a third set of political parties that basically don't engage, or didn't engage, because of what they saw as the PA's manipulative tactics to prevent a real democratic process. And this includes things like maintaining uncertainty around when the elections would happen, which made it very hard to prepare; playing around with the rules; and having elections in two phases to give Fatah a larger chance of controlling the election.

And so a lot of groups just said, we're not participating in these elections because they're not fully democratic. They're being manipulated by the PA. And we don't want to further legitimize these efforts. So there are many different reasons, but those are the main ones.

Yara Hawari 6:02

So moving us forward a bit to talk about the elections that just happened. Firstly, they were held in two phases. I was hoping that you could explain the reasons for that. And then also, there was an increase of independent lists running. By that I mean lists that weren't running under a specific political party but rather as independents — and many of those lists, of course, had very obvious political affiliations. But I was wondering if you could explain those two phenomena for us.

Fadi Quran 6:32

Those are great questions, because they are actually part of the anomalies that we faced in the last municipal elections. Now legally, Palestinian municipal elections are supposed to happen in one phase, and they were all supposed to

happen at once. And historically, for the most part, that's how they've been conducted.

Now, as many of our listeners are aware, the Palestinian Authority canceled legislative and presidential elections that were supposed to happen last summer. And they came under significant pressure from the European Union and other international actors to have at least some form of elections, and municipal elections, or local elections, were being pushed.

But of course, the PA — and particularly the Fatah party — didn't want any form of elections, because they knew that if such elections were conducted, they would likely suffer a big loss. So it was about redesigning the election process to give them the highest chance of controlling as many seats as possible.

And that's why they split the election into two phases. That's the main assessment. Because they had the first elections in the smaller villages and towns — but there are hundreds of them across Palestine — and in a lot of those villages, they pushed towards not actually having elections but having consensus lists. And that meant that Fatah didn't really — in over 50% of towns that had elections in the first phase, there weren't any real competitive elections. There were just the towns coming together and choosing representatives of the families to sit there.

And then in the second elections, that gave more space and more time for Fatah in the second phase to plan their strategy on how they would engage in the larger cities. And it also gave a level of uncertainty or ambiguity, because a lot of people lived under the assumption — and there was consistent disinformation — that the second phase of the elections is not going to happen, they're going to be delayed. Gaza didn't have elections in the second phase. And so this was essentially a tactic to have it in two phases to prevent Fatah from having a massive loss.

Now, of course, the Palestinian Authority's talking points, just to mention them — they said that they did this for logistical reasons, because it was easier to

coordinate it this way, etc. But speaking with members of the Palestinian Central Elections Commission, those who run the elections, they told me directly that it wasn't a logistical issue. It was 100% a political calculation.

Now, what happened in the context of your second question, Yara, about the independent lists, is that in a lot of the larger Palestinian towns, what we see — and what we have seen generally — is that the political parties have lost their bases. Polls conducted three and four years ago showed that about 73% of Palestinian youth say that they do not relate to or are not members of any of the leading political parties that exist today, which is a very large number. And let's remember, a big portion of the Palestinian electorate are young people under the age of 35.

And so consequently, you began seeing a lot of this — both the younger generation and a lot of the people that are disenchanted from the political parties decide to run as independents. And you saw an interesting thing happen as well, where there were members — particularly, to some extent, members of Hamas and members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the PFLP — creating sometimes joint lists with independents in different cities. Because although the parties themselves didn't run, a lot of the members of those parties actually wanted a level of agency.

And so they decided to form these lists that were not affiliated and were actually a coalition of the willing. And those two factors — both having a younger generation that does not really care about the political parties, and having members of political parties who disagreed with their parties and wanted to run despite their party's position — led to this. I'd say in almost every city in Palestine, there were independent lists, and they performed quite well compared to historical standards.

Yara Hawari 10:50

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Now, Fadi, you and I both live in Palestine, and I think we both felt this air of excitement — correct me if I'm wrong — but particularly in the second round. So I wanted to ask you, why do you think that was? And what does it mean in the context of a population that has so few opportunities to participate in democratic processes?

Fadi Quran 11:26

I mean, you're totally right, Yara. There was a sense of excitement in the street, and even, I'd say, a level of inspiration in some cases that I saw. I think the main thing is that Palestinians, as a people — we've been silenced, and silenced on multiple levels, right? In the Palestinian narrative, there has been an attempt by Israelis to just wipe it out. The Palestinian voice and political will — there has been, Mahmoud Abbas's dictatorship has taken efforts to prevent that will from surfacing.

And I think today, the excitement we saw was largely based on the fact that people want to be heard. People are sick of the status quo. And people saw these municipal elections as an opportunity to shake the cages that they were in, and potentially as an opportunity to move in a different direction — even though the municipalities do not have that much leverage on the political sphere. They do have some leverage in impacting people's lives and in pushing different narratives. And I think people were excited to teach Fatah and the other political parties a lesson and say, we want to be heard.

Yara Hawari 12:36

So let's get to the nitty-gritty and discuss the actual results. What was particularly

interesting or surprising? And what can we expect going forward?

Fadi Quran 12:49

Elections — oftentimes there are attempts to analyze them on the macro level. And that's important. But one of the most interesting things about these elections is that actually, almost in every Palestinian city and area, there were completely different dynamics — very localized dynamics — that played a huge role, to some extent, in the results.

And what I mean to say by that is, for example, people in these elections were not just voting Fatah versus Hamas. Hamas, as we said, didn't run in these elections. And Fatah sought to turn these elections into a technocratic vote, where they played a significant financial role under the table, but they tried to put a narrative forward that this was not really Fatah running in these elections — although, of course, they had candidates.

But on the local level, you saw that in many cases — like in cities such as Hebron, cities such as al-Bireh, cities such as Nablus, and elsewhere — the old guard, the old generation of leaders, lost a significant amount of seats. You also saw in certain areas, like Jericho for example, where the elections led to sadly a situation where certain familial and tribal clashes flared up because of how the elections were engaged.

And in some places, like the city of al-Bireh, where a new list that had members of both Hamas — or people who had historically been affiliated with Hamas — and also the leftist parties and even former Fatah members, this broad coalition won a massive majority of over 60% of the votes, which was a big shock.

And then you saw in other places, such as Ramallah, where Fatah invested significantly in maintaining their leadership of the municipality there. On the other hand, they didn't have any other real inspiring lists that people could trust. The

other lists included great people but not many skilled people that people felt they could trust to run the municipality.

But overall, even though you had these kinds of very local dynamics — that had to do with the people running, how angry people were with the old guard — the three macro things that we saw in these elections, or themes:

Number one, official Fatah lists performed horribly. I think this was a sign for Fatah that generally, if they run with their official names, if they run with figures historically connected to the party, they're going to lose miserably. They don't have any support. And in some areas Fatah did win, but they won largely because the people running under the Fatah banner are not really associated with the Mahmoud Abbas–Hussein al-Sheikh crew, but are more associated with opposition crews. So that was one big macro sign.

The second was that, although there was excitement in the street when the elections were announced, the actual participation in elections was sadly very low: 53% of people participated in these elections. Now, this partially has to do with how the PA manipulated the process. And what I mean by that is that the PA, when it opened the registration for both running for the elections and also just registering to vote, it was almost not advertised, and it was for a very short period, which meant that very few people actually had the chance to be able to vote or to know any details about the elections and how they were happening. But it was still a very low percentage, unfortunately.

And then the third macro theme that we saw in these elections was unity lists. Lists that included members of the different political parties and that ran with both the narrative and rhetoric of unity and the rhetoric of opposition to the PA performed very well, despite having very limited resources. And I think that's probably a sign from the future of Palestine, or an echo from the future: that the way leadership is going to move here, and the people that are going to be trusted, are those that

are capable of building broad coalitions together and speaking very clearly against the old guard — that can mobilize the majority of Palestinians.

Yara Hawari 17:14

Thank you, Fadi, for that. So there is an argument to be had that democratic processes like this are meaningless under brutal military occupation, where candidates are arrested by the Israeli regime and political activity is severely restricted in general. Do you think elections such as these are important in this context?

Fadi Quran 17:38

I've been thinking about that a lot, and to be frank, Yara, over the last couple of months. Because on one hand, what we saw was that, for example, in al-Bireh but also in Hebron, candidates that won and that were oppositional — let's say, to the Oslo PA narrative — were arrested.

So in al-Bireh, Islam al-Tawil, who before the elections even happened was running for mayor and who won the position of mayor, was arrested four days before the elections by the Israelis. A lot of candidates were harassed by the Palestinian Authority security forces during the elections. And some of them received threats after the elections that they shouldn't try to be dissidents while they're in the town halls. And in Hebron also, members of the municipality were arrested.

So there's a question: if we're running, and then those who are challenging the status quo are arrested, silenced, or threatened, then why are people running to begin with? Can you have a democracy under apartheid, when Israel, with the PA's support, can socially engineer the results, even if the results are against them?

And so that's one side of the argument, and I think it's an important piece to say that Israel is trying to engineer the politics of Palestinians, even when democratic

processes happen, to get the final results that it wants.

On the other hand, there's an argument to be made that having these processes — no matter how much Israel and the PA try to destroy them or damage them or shatter them — is important, because it allows for new leaders and figures and faces and experiments to run and to push a new narrative into the Palestinian street. And oftentimes, those that are arrested after they run in this situation actually gain more popularity and their ideas actually become more supported.

And at the same time, those within the municipalities can slowly push towards a framework of resistance against the Israeli occupation, even if there are a lot of efforts against them.

And what I would argue is: I think these elections and these democratic processes are important to have, but we should be more proactive about how we prepare and use these moments to fight against the occupation. To frame them as part of the resistance to colonialism, and to frame them as resistance broadly speaking, and not to normalize the status quo through these elections.

I think the PA and Israel would like to normalize the idea that colonialism is here, occupation is here, Palestinians have elections to run their day-to-day lives, and everything's okay. And if that's how democratic processes are run within Palestinian society, they're dangerous. They should be boycotted.

But if we can actually create a narrative where democratic processes are run — let's say, we're here as a liberation struggle to fight colonialism, that's our political agenda — and then they step up and challenge the PA, then they can be effective. And we haven't gotten to that point, unfortunately, in terms of strategic engagement. But I think Palestinian society is getting there, step by step.

Yara Hawari 21:04

It really is that age-old question of reform versus rebuilding from scratch, and the

argument isn't about if we should be politically active or not, but rather where should we place that energy.

And I think a conversation that you and I and many others have is: is it worth it? Is it worth propping up a political institution that is very problematic, that is riddled with corruption? But it also necessitates us to think — if we don't take part in these kinds of processes, what do we do instead? And we have to be proactive in creating and being part of something else. And that something else is, in many cases, yet to be seen.

So I think it's an ongoing conversation, and I think, of course, democracy and leadership can look like something else. It doesn't have to fit into these boxes of elections — of often what the donor community imposes on us and insists that we should be doing.

Fadi, I want to ask you a final question. You've touched upon this in many of your answers already, but what do you think these latest elections tell us about the Palestinian people and the state of politics in the '67 territories?

Fadi Quran 22:22

I mean, I think your comment is spot on, Yara, in terms of this age-old question about reform versus full-on revolution, and also the question about how to best proactively engage.

And I think this is the core question that we need to answer. And also, it may not be a "this or that" type of question, but maybe "this and that" — and how you build a society that both has individuals engaging in the processes that are internal, like these local elections, and trying to change things from inside, that are coordinating directly with people that are trying to take these systems down, and building a broad enough coalition that can synergistically work on those two things together. But this is a broader conversation. I think it's worth having in-

depth.

And I think also where our energies are invested is the most important aspect of these, because you don't want to invest your energy in something that has, as business people would say, low return on investment. And I do think that in some of these elections, the investment going into them brings very little results because of the larger context that we're in.

And I think that's where it actually connects me to Palestinians within 1967 and where they're at. I think just going around to different cities and engaging with some of the parties and youth groups and independent groups running in the different cities across the West Bank, and listening to where society is at, I think there are a few levels to engage with.

On one level, you realize just — people are frustrated within 1967. People are sick of the status quo, and people want their lives to at least become a little bit better. Whether that means having cleaner streets, whether that means having playgrounds for their children to play in, whether that means being able to travel — people really have those localized demands.

And then there's another level of society, which is what I want to call a lot of people who have a sense of learned helplessness — people who feel like nothing's going to change. Whatever we do, these corrupt leaders and Israel are too strong. And there's that level. There's that narrative within society as well.

Then you have a third level, or a third subgroup, which basically is saying: in order to end colonialism and apartheid that Israel is practicing against us, one of the core obstacles in our way is the Palestinian Authority, the rulers of Palestinian society. And we need to be engaging at all levels — across different places of the presence of the Palestinian people, whether Palestinians in 1948, Palestinians in the diaspora, everywhere — we need to be engaging to remove these rulers and put in place a representative leadership.

These are the different parts of Palestinian society in 1967. People who want significant change — what we saw in the Unity Intifada last year — that see the Palestinians as one united front. People who are feeling a sense of helplessness and no change in the future. And then people who just want to improve their day-to-day lives.

I think Palestinian society at large is moving towards that big picture. Particularly the younger generation, who are more hopeful, are moving towards that big picture. We want Palestine liberated. We want all Palestinians liberated, no matter where they are. And we're willing to sacrifice and find ways to engage to achieve that goal.

The challenge with that subgroup — that goes back to the point you mentioned, Yara — is that there's still no clear body, because the PLO is basically weak and broken down. The political parties are dilapidated. There's no movement that those individuals feel they can be a part of to achieve that larger goal. Although in their heart, psychologically, that's what they want. And so they end up being kind of sidelined from the day-to-day politics.

And I think this is, for Palestinians listening, the question we need to answer: how do we revive the Palestinian liberation movement and create spaces for all the young people and all the Palestinian people who want a better future to reengage in politics?

And I think Palestinian National Council elections, or some form of reform to the PLO — taking the PLO away from Mahmoud Abbas and his cronies — is an important step on that path. But I would love your thoughts, Yara, in terms of how you think that can be done.

Yara Hawari 27:10

So this is a first on Rethinking Palestine, where we've had a guest turn the tables

around and ask me a question. But I do think it's an important one.

And you and I have discussed this before, and I think you're right in saying that there is a consensus amongst the Palestinian people that we can't achieve liberation with our current leadership or the current leadership structures. And that leads us on to asking the question — or rather thinking about what Audre Lorde, the well-known feminist writer, wrote when she said that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

And so for me, the elections are those tools. The way that the current system is set up in the '67 territories and the political institutions — the way that they have not only been manipulated and dominated by Fatah and by PA institutions — they also have a massive amount of foreign involvement and donor involvement.

And I think inevitably that means that having a huge change in the status quo, a huge revamp of the Palestinian leadership, is not possible under those conditions. And especially because those institutions are not representative and don't claim to be representative of all the Palestinian people in all of their geographic fragments.

So I think these institutions, these processes — whilst the excitement for them is understandable in the context of a people that have been denied democracy and democratic practice for so long — in the long run, I think they have, as you said, limited gains and limited potential in terms of achieving liberation.

Fadi, I think we're going to end it there. This has been a really great conversation, and thank you so much for asking me that final question. And we hope to have you on Rethinking Palestine again very soon.

Fadi Quran 29:05

Thank you, Yara. It's always a pleasure to connect and discuss these important topics with you.

Yara Hawari 29:13

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