

Praxis of Palestinian Democracy: The Elections that Never Were and the Events of May 2021

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In recent years, time and again, the end of spring has brought opportunities to look to historical Palestine. In 2021, it was assumed that the occasion would be the holding of elections on either side of the Green Line. Both elections were perceived as mechanisms for maintaining the status quo.¹ This proved to be true in Israel: although Netanyahu was finally expelled from the government, it is clear from the Lapid-Bennett executive's first steps that nothing is going to change where the Palestinians are concerned. In theory, at least, the future of a part of the Palestinians was also going to be affected by the holding of elections in occupied territory. But these elections were cancelled. Shortly thereafter, the world was nevertheless forced to turn its gaze to Jerusalem and to reflect on the ensuing events, whose transformational impact may have been more overwhelming than a trip to the polls.

The elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) were scheduled for 22 May 2021, the presidential election for 31 July, and a third election, for the Palestinian National Council (PNC) – the parliament of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which represents the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and the diaspora (although not Palestinian citizens of Israel) – for 31 August. They were presented as the first elections in 15 years, al-

though other elections had already been announced – and suspended – in 2011. The first legislative and presidential elections took place in 1996, shortly after the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA), intended to be a temporary institution. Yasser Arafat dominated the political arena until his death in 2004, and new legislative elections were not held until 2006. To the surprise of many Western foreign ministries, Hamas won a majority of the votes. Israel, the United States and the European Union imposed sanctions on the Palestinian government and gave their blessing to the power-struggle-turned-violent-conflict between Hamas and Fatah. The former would take control of the Gaza Strip, which was soon after subjected to an Israeli blockade; the latter would govern the West Bank. The deep enmity has continued, notwithstanding various attempts at reconciliation, to the present day.²

After 15 years of division and in a completely transformed historical Palestine, new elections were announced in January 2021,³ giving the political arena only a few months to prepare. The decision was closely related to the international political field, particularly the arrival of Joe Biden to the White House. In Ramallah, Biden was expected to join the demands of international society for the PA to renew its eroded legitimacy in preparation for an eventual return to peace talks on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Madrid Conference.

The same question was soon on everyone's lips: what is the point of elections, and what legitimacy do they have, in an apartheid reality in which Israel has control over all historical Palestine and the PA is per-

¹ www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/17/israeli-palestinian-elections-democracy-polls-palestinians?fbclid=IwAR09q7L1kEw4bgthwHB0CZC1ivCwFg5cbszm2FpLK8qEdiG62vGgV0i0Shw

² www.mei.edu/publications/how-palestinians-agreed-elections

³ www.palestine-studies.org/ar/node/1650938

ceived as the guarantor of the outsourcing of the occupation represented by the Oslo Accords? Whilst ballot boxes could not be set up in Jerusalem, the elections to the Knesset would include polling stations in the colonies in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Would this not be a mere exercise of procedural democracy,⁴ when many other elements of democratic culture are absent and the people are perceived more as consumers than citizens?

The Covid-19 pandemic was not a fruitful period for the PA. In addition to all the fingers pointing to what has been called “healthcare apartheid,”⁵ some experts accused it of failing to respond quickly and effectively. These accusations joined complaints voiced for years by a growing number of Palestinians.⁶ Quite especially, they point to a progressive authoritarianism and arbitrary use of presidential decrees (as in the case of the convening of the elections itself⁷) to erode counterweights and shrink the democratic space and diversity that characterize the Palestinian political arena. They also denounce the repression of citizens and quashing of any counter-hegemonic resistance by the Palestinian security forces – with blatant symbols, such as the assassination of Nizar Banat on 24 June⁸ – or as a result of coordination on security matters with Israel, which has led to the arrest, and even murder, of dozens of Palestinian activists.⁹

The PA is also criticized for having abandoned the liberation struggle as the essence of any nationalist movement to become an organization for building a state for which the conditions have not been met. In a closely related vein, it is further criticized for hollowing out and co-opting the PLO, and for its failure to represent the current interests of the entire Palestinian people. Even in the territory destined to become a state, the increasing decline in the population’s material wellbeing is lamented. Few would be exempted from this latter situation, apart from the economic and political elites, in what is a traditional

reproach of the corruption, clientelism and neopatrimonialism of a system that ensures the survival of a large number of families without cultivating their affiliation based on ideals or principles to build a genuine political movement.¹⁰ In May 2021, some 3,000 Palestinians signed a petition calling for Mahmoud Abbas to resign from his triple position at the head of Fatah, the PLO and the PA.¹¹

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All of this criticism is a reflection, in whole or in part, of a multidimensional fragmentation that the Palestinian people have been suffering for decades. First, between political fields subjected to different control mechanisms as a consequence of the colonization of historical Palestine that began with the Nakba, especially through the establishment of Israel in 1948. Second, between Fatah and Hamas, although many consider that this division, advertised as a power struggle, has become a means of power sharing in which both groups win and gain popularity in certain circles. A relatively new division has emerged within Fatah, represented by three electoral lists that would have contested the elections: the “Fatah list” from Mahmoud Abbas’s circle, the “Freedom list,” spearheaded by the imprisoned Marwan Barghouti and Yasser Arafat’s nephew Nasser al-Qudwa, and the “Future list,” supported by Mohammed Dahlan. Polling indicated that the core Fatah list would win the largest share of votes, although not enough to form

⁴ <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/democracy-in-the-west-bank-and-gaza-more-than-elections/>

⁵ <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/occupation-in-the-time-of-covid-19-holding-israel-accountable-for-palestinian-health/>

⁶ <https://al-shabaka.org/focuses/focus-on-palestinian-political-leadership/>

⁷ www.elections.ps/tabid/1127/language/en-US/Default.aspx

⁸ www.middleeasteye.net/news/nizar-banat-dies-during-palestinian-authority-raid

⁹ www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israel-palestine-arrest-campaign-aims-destroy-new-movement

¹⁰ <https://al-shabaka.org/summaries/neopatrimonialism-corruption-and-the-palestinian-authority-pathways-to-real-reform/>

¹¹ <http://almajd.net/2021/06/24/عب-ةاقاااسا-لىل-ةىع اءاا-ةصرىع لل-ةشقاام/>

a majority in the PLC; the two breakaway factions of Fatah and Hamas might have won more seats.¹² All of this is compounded by the question of Mahmoud Abbas's successor, which remains an unknown for the vast majority.

The most pressing differences, however, are those between the official leadership and a growing segment of the Palestinian people, especially from an intergenerational perspective. As a symbol, the PLC headquarters has presided over Ramallah's Youth Square, empty and unmoved, since 2006. No Palestinian under the age of 34 living in the Occupied Territories has had the opportunity to vote. The average age of this population is less than 22 – Mahmoud Abbas is 85 – in a system that automatically expels young people, with mechanisms such as a minimum age limit of 28 to run for office, whilst the majority of representatives are well over 50, or the requirement to pay a fee of 20,000 dollars and quit one's job with no certainty of being elected simply to be included on an electoral list. Initiatives such as Nabd al-Balad, an independent list that sought to represent Palestinian youth and their interests, were anecdotal. Although there was an effort by several factions to include more young people, some viewed it as little more than a cosmetic measure undertaken with an eye to their positions on the lists.

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This neopatriarchal system also excludes women, despite their key role throughout the history and present of the Palestinian resistance.¹³ Several initiatives have arisen to combat this, such as Jeel al-Tajdeed al-Democracy, an alternative online parliamentary list

that began as a challenge to the elections but continues today as a platform for organizing a democratic change, or a Gaza-based Facebook page called "15 years," that accuses Hamas and Fatah of prioritizing their political rivalry over urgent material concerns resulting from the de-development to which the Palestinian economy has been subjected for years. In a less organized way, complaints are constant in the streets and on social media.

Just as many expected and had been rumoured for weeks, on 29 April the elections were postponed indefinitely.¹⁴ The alleged reason was the impossibility for Palestinians in East Jerusalem to participate in them. Fatah had already made it clear that the cards were marked when it imposed the extremely short period for the mobilization and creation of lists, as well as a proportional representation system that would have favoured parties with a strong national presence, but its internal divisions were an insurmountable obstacle. With this decision, everyone involved who benefits from the status quo came out a winner. The PA remains in power and has met the demands, whilst Hamas, perceived as a lesser evil that still keeps some spirit of resistance alive, has gained in popularity.¹⁵ International donors, who had feared a repeat of the events of 2006 and were unwilling to accept a Hamas victory, could also breathe a sigh of relief. Everyone wins except the Palestinian people, once again.

The events of May 2021 were the coup de grâce for official Palestinian leadership, confirming the decline the elections were intended to hide. The PA's impotence, usually expressed through silence and irrelevance, in the face of the expulsions in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan and the violence in Jerusalem and against Palestinian citizens of Israel, lay bare its futility. Hamas's entry into action endowed the movement with legitimacy through war and as the sole organized alternative, not of consensus or a new liberation strategy. Both pillars of the traditional leadership were ignored by the "Unity Intifada" throughout historical Palestine and by the Palestinian diaspora around the world, whose stated goal was to rid itself of the political fragmentation imposed on the Palestinian peo-

¹² www.jmcc.org/documentsandmaps.aspx?id=892

¹³ <https://al-shabaka.org/briefs/the-political-marginalization-of-palestinian-women-in-the-west-bank/>

¹⁴ <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84493>

¹⁵ <http://pcpsr.org/en/node/843>

ple with the aim of atomizing their struggle and to re-signify, especially through depoliticization, their resistance. In addition to the protests and online activities, the 18 May strike became a transformative and extremely symbolic event, fuelled by subsequent actions, such as Palestine Economic Week, to keep up the momentum and remind people that the ceasefire in no way represents the end of structural violence.

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As with al-Hirak al-Shababi in 2011-2013, the protests and initiatives were largely led by Palestinian youths, many of whom are not affiliated with any political party, in a way reminiscent of how the first Intifada likewise escaped the control of the PLO, then exiled in Tunisia.¹⁶ As the events unfolded, the leaders of the PA appeared to look on from a distance, whilst their security forces were busy arresting or intimidating activists and demonstrators, or giving their names to the Israeli security forces, in a desper-

ate effort to assert their authority. The demands for unity were joined by renewed denunciations of the current political system, utterly disconnected from the demands of representativeness, legitimacy, participation and consensus embodied in “The Dignity and Hope Manifesto.”¹⁷

May 2021 represented, above all, a call for a paradigm shift. One of the key demands was to leave the Oslo framework behind and allow the Palestinians to articulate their future on their own terms. This evolution has been felt in various spheres, bolstered by the growing number of voices that speak of “apartheid.”¹⁸ This is not the case in international society, especially the international donors who, a growing number of Palestinians argue, have become part of the problem.¹⁹ They refuse to abandon the Oslo framework and everything it represents. The end of Oslo and the end of the PA go hand in hand: the PA is the only actor willing to accept the continuous concessions imposed from the capitals, and this funding is its only means of staying in power. As with the suspension of the elections, the Israel-Hamas-PA triangle has emerged as the main beneficiary of the status quo, and they are thus also the main parties interested in investing their efforts in repressing potential alternative leaderships that call for genuine resistance. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that the seed has been sown and that, elections or otherwise, the PA will sooner or later be forced to look at itself in the mirror held up by more and more Palestinians.

¹⁶ www.masarat.ps/article/4995/لدارحالی-إلى-إل-كركال-نم-ني-طسلفل-ابشال

¹⁷ <https://mondoweiss.net/2021/05/the-manifesto-of-dignity-and-hope/>

¹⁸ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/limitations-possibilities-apartheid-framework-lana/id1537774938?i=1000507182508>

¹⁹ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2014/06/04/re-inventing-european-aid-to-palestine/>