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TEIM Election Watch Analysis

PRE-ELECTION ANALYSIS:

PALESTINE/ National reconciliation and elections still on hold

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General Situation

In 2005, Mahmoud Abbas, Fatah's¹ secretary general was elected president of the Palestinian Authority to succeed Yasser Arafat. A year later, Hamas won parliamentary elections. Both four-year terms, the presidential and legislative, have expired, and the ambiguity of the Basic Law has allowed both to remain in power. Palestinian leaders have proved unable to resolve this situation or to agree to convene elections as each term has come to an end. Internal Palestinian politics today is, thus, at an impasse, with a vacuum of leadership accentuated by continuing confrontation between the various factions.

After cancelling the date on which legislative and presidential elections were due to be held – 24 January 2010 – a new date for Palestinian elections was not, and has still not to this day, been fixed. Indeed this has proved quite impossible given the confrontation in which the two major parties, Fatah and Hamas are immersed.

Gone is the unity government formed during 18 tense months, which ended abruptly due to the armed conflict that took place in 2007 in Gaza, which ultimately resulted in the Islamic Resistance Movement seizing control of the Gaza Strip and leaving the Palestinian National Authority just the West Bank. Since then, there have been several attempts at reconciliation – under Egypt's sponsorship² – as well as several events revealing, time and again, the ever widening gap between the two parties.

Elections

Mahmoud Abbas called for presidential and legislative elections in a presidential decree in October last year in an attempt to put pressure on the Palestinian factions to sign the Egyptian reconciliation paper³. However, Hamas and other parties refused to do so, and still refuse to, claiming that the wording that had appeared in an earlier draft had been changed, leaving out what were important details for them, such as the terms "resistance" and the "return of refugees" being declared national rights. Subsequently, in early November, Abu Mazen declared that he would not stand for president and shortly afterwards, on the 12th of that same month, Hanna Nasser, the Director of the Central Electoral Commission announced that the elections could not be held for various reasons⁴.

The Egyptian text proposed holding elections on 28 June 2010, a date agreed upon by all parties in the conflict, with the idea that such a timeframe would give the various parties enough time to achieve genuine reconciliation⁵. In

¹ Party which forms the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and dominates the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO).

² The meetings between the two factions came to an end following the Israeli bombings of the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009. In March 2009, contacts were reestablished.

³ Initially, this paper was drawn up based on the requests made by the different leaders of the Palestinian parties, compiled by the Egyptian negotiators during their encounters.

⁴ These reasons include the impossibility of having the electoral roll ready for the proposed date, Israel preventing the residents of East Jerusalem from voting, and Hamas' refusal to allow the elections to take place in Gaza.

⁵ The Egyptians threatened to block the tunnels leading across the Egyptian border from Gaza to counter Hamas' refusal to sign the document. They are also building a metal barrier along the border which will only worsen the embargo that Gazans are suffering.

order for the elections to take place in June, an announcement needed to be made this March, since the law requires three months notice for any elections.

What is indispensable now, given the current circumstances, is a solution to the entrenched internal situation and a revival of political life that can only come through true national reconciliation. Once this occurs, elections will be called and held automatically.

Internal political situation: Fatah and Hamas

The two actors which truly have the power to resolve the internal Palestinian conflict are the two major Palestinian parties. That said, the issues dividing them are numerous and have built up considerably over time. Despite statements by the party leaders declaring their willingness to achieve reconciliation, what is clear is that ongoing accusations and actions reveal the opposite to be happening.

Such thorny issues as the political prisoners of both parties, the Goldstone Report, the collaboration of PNA security forces with the Israeli army, the involvement of two Fatah members - associates of Mohammed Dahlan - in the assassination of Hamas leader Mahmoud_al-Mabhouh in Dubai, Mahmoud Abbas' intention of resuming peace talks (albeit indirect ones) with Israel, the presence of Salam Fayad at the Herzliya Conference⁶, Fatah's intention of holding municipal elections on July 17, 2010, only in the West Bank, and the boycott of the emergency parliamentary session of the Palestinian Legislative Council proposed by its speaker, Aziz Duwaik⁷, have only contributed to undermining the timid attempts at fence-mending. Even the most convincing of these attempts, both in word and deed that was the visit in February of Saaz Nabil, a member of Fatah's Central Committee to the Gaza Strip was somewhat undermined. On this trip he met with various leaders of the political parties, including an audience with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. Following this meeting, an agreement to create committees made up of members from all factions, with the aim of achieving national reconciliation, was announced.

Conclusion

More than two and a half years have gone by in which Palestinian politics have festered, the sole focus being on 'national reconciliation', all attempts at which have been futile. Indeed, the term itself has become increasingly meaningless, given its overuse by politicians from both sides who do everything but take the measures necessary for achieving it. With time, the situation has only gotten worse, with numerous decisions and issues paralysed until a solution can be found. All the while Israeli threats continue. The two factions, locked in a

⁶ This conference is the most important in terms of Israel's internal security concerns and involves its secret services.

⁷ According to the March 2nd edition of the newspaper Felesteen, Aziz Duwaik, president of the PLC and a member of Hamas, summoned an urgent meeting of the Council, which is located in Ramallah, to try to adopt a response to Israel's inflammatory remarks about Jerusalem, the Abraham Mosque in Hebron, and the Bilal ibn Rabah Mosque or Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem. The parliamentary session could not take place because PNA security officials impeded Duwaik and other members of his party from entering Ramallah.

squabble over who has the greater power, seem to ignore the fact that the biggest loser in all this time lost, is the Palestinian people.

It was widely expected that the Arab summit that took place in Libya this March, would foster dialogue between the factions. Once again, however, neither side was able to put aside its differences – differences which are, in fact, a clear reflection of the interests and rivalries of the various Arab countries. At present, little on the political scene would indicate any impending change to the status quo, despite the gathering of various Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip on 21 April⁸. Palestinian reconciliation must necessarily flow from Egypt, as both sides have made clear, although Kuwait and Qatar's recently announced intention of getting involved in the reconciliation process may yet increase the possibilities of it being achieving.

Meanwhile, the fact that elections must be convened with three months prior notice, and must take place in June 2010 according to the Egyptian document, is not an obstacle given that, were reconciliation between the two sides reached, there would be no legal impediment to calling and holding elections on another date. What is more complicated in present-day Palestinian politics, is getting the various factions to put aside their resentments and overcome the obstacles, and through honest dialogue achieve the genuine national reconciliation so sorely needed by the Palestinian people.

⁸ According to the International Middle East Media Center (IMEMC) the Palestinian factions met in northern Gaza on April 21 to form a joint response to the Israeli decision to deport thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank.