

Crisis-ridden Palestinian Authority calls elections

Jean Shaoul
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The Palestinian Authority (PA) has announced elections, a cabinet reshuffle and the resignation of Saeb Erekat, its chief negotiator with Israel. It is the desperate reaction of a regime in crisis, trying to forestall the spread of the mass movements that have toppled Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak.

Presidential and parliamentary elections are to be held sometime in September, and local elections on July 9. Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas's term of office expired in January 2009. Since then, he has called no new elections, dismantled all elected bodies and has been ruling by decree.

The latest moves by the PA follow Al Jazeera's publication of leaked papers that confirm the PA's role as a subcontractor for the United States and Israel to police the Palestinian people.

As the "Palestine Papers" revealed, Abbas established his regime at Washington's behest and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton threatened to pull the plug on the PA if there was any change in leadership.

Abbas presides over a police state in the West Bank, which has allowed the PA officials themselves and a handful of millionaires to enrich themselves on the proceeds from aid sent by the US, European Union and Gulf States. The PA has one of the highest ratios of security personnel to the general population—1 in 80—trained in Jordan and funded by the US. Prison construction far outpaces that of schools, and these prisons are synonymous with torture.

The PA has carried out a ruthless campaign of arrests, kidnappings, detention without trial, and shootings to subdue all resistance to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Its priority was crushing its principal political rival, the bourgeois Islamist movement Hamas. The leaked papers show that the PA received

prior warning of and was complicit in the 2008-2009 Israeli invasion of Gaza that killed more than 1,400 Palestinians. PA negotiators even urged Israel to tighten the blockade of Gaza.

The PA banned demonstrations in support of the mass uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, as did Hamas. For the PA, Cairo, along with Tel Aviv and Washington, has been its most consistent backer. Both the PA and Hamas are equally fearful of the spread of revolutionary contagion.

Hamas has refused to take part in the elections. It won the parliamentary elections in January 2006, and in June 2007 launched a pre-emptive coup against Abbas's party Fatah, which had under Washington's tutelage been planning its overthrow. Like Fatah, it has repeatedly opposed fresh elections.

Fawzi Barhoum, Hamas's spokesperson, said, "Hamas will not participate or recognise or give any cover for this election and we consider this announcement a conspiracy against the Palestinian people."

Holding out the possibility of future cooperation with the client of the US and Israel, however, he added, "Hamas believes in elections but elections can come only after [political] reconciliation."

With the resignation of the cabinet, the unelected prime minister, Salam Fayyad, will handpick another government of "technocrats", a euphemism for unelected businessmen committed to his free market policies. Of the outgoing 24-member cabinet, 2 ministers had resigned, 6 are marooned in Gaza under Israel's blockade, and several are under investigation for incompetence and corruption.

Far from indicating any leftward shift, Fayyad is if anything more right-wing than Abbas and is expected to reappoint some of the same people to his new

cabinet.

The former World Bank economist and IMF representative in Palestine served under both Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas as finance minister. Abbas, in breach of his powers, appointed him prime minister of a new “independent” government to replace the elected Hamas government in June 2007, after his attempt to mount a coup was foiled. Neither Fayyad nor his appointees were ever ratified by the Legislative Council, where Hamas holds a majority of the seats. Fayyad himself has no popular support.

While there has been some economic growth as a result of a temporary inflow of foreign aid, it has benefited only the small clique around the PA. Average annual income rose only US\$92 between 2007 and 2009, from US\$1,298 to US\$1,390. Fayyad was forced to admit that even this was “unsustainable” as long as Israel controlled all aspects of Palestinian trade. At least 25 percent are unemployed, and poverty is widespread even for those in work. The price of food and basic commodities has risen sharply, alongside a fall in real wages for the vast majority of workers.

Fayyad and Abbas’s main role has been to improve Israel’s “security” by employing a 25,000-strong security force trained by US Lieutenant General Keith Dayton, the West Bank’s real ruler.

All this has earned Fayyad praise from the *New York Times*, which called him “a political independent who gained the confidence of the West and is largely respected in Israel.” According to Nathan J. Brown of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, he is “indispensable to US diplomacy.”

The PA has been thoroughly discredited as a result of both its political and economic offensive against its own people and its negotiations with Israel.

The leaked Palestine papers published by Al Jazeera revealed that Fatah was prepared to surrender to every one of Israel’s diktats, even on the supposed “red line” issues, including ceding virtually all of East Jerusalem, renouncing the right of return for all but 10,000 of the 5 million Palestinian refugees, and agreeing to the “transfer” of tens of thousands of Israeli Arabs to a new Palestinian entity in order to guarantee that Israel would retain its Jewish majority. PA officials discussed with Israel the assassination of named Palestinian resistance fighters, including members of Fatah’s own Al Aqsa Martyr’s Brigade.

The PA has sacrificed Erekat, a former academic and newspaper editor who has been involved in negotiations with Israel for a Palestinian state since the 1991 Madrid conference. His personal position was fatally compromised by records showing that he boasted about his collaboration in a meeting with President Barack Obama’s deputy Middle East envoy, David Hale, in September 2009. “We have had to kill Palestinians to establish one authority, one gun and the rule of law,” said Erekat. “We continue to perform our obligations. We have invested time and effort and killed our own people to maintain order and the rule of law.”

At first he attempted to brazen it out, claiming that the documents were forgeries.

The PA’s measures are a last-ditch attempt—and transparently so—to shore up its credibility. But they are essentially futile. The intense social contradictions that toppled Tunisia’s and Egypt’s hated dictators are undermining all the pillars of US policy in the Middle East, and producing a movement from below against their own police state regime.



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