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No Jerusalem, no elections

After losing their first chance to vote since 2006, Palestinians are deeply disappointed. The US, Israel, and the PA all bear responsibility

No Jerusalem, no elections! This mantra had been reiterated on a daily basis by top officials in the Palestinian National Authority (PA), and so it was no surprise when Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announced last Thursday that the Palestinian Legislative Council elections scheduled for 22 May were being put off 'until the participation of Jerusalem and its people is guaranteed.'

Palestinians are deeply disappointed and angry at losing their first chance to vote since 2006. Israeli authorities had not made any positive or negative public statements on the impending polls. But with a show of force, the police arrested three candidates holding an event in East Jerusalem and dispersed the crowd.

With few exceptions, the estimated 340,000 Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem, which Israel occupied in 1967 and subsequently annexed, do not have Israeli citizenship and thus may not vote in Israeli elections. As part of the Oslo Accords negotiated during the 1990s peace process, Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) had agreed that Palestinians in East Jerusalem would be allowed to vote in PA elections.

Israeli settlement expansion

Although Jerusalem is slated to be the capital of a Palestinian state according to the internationally accepted 'two-state solution', voting in East Jerusalem has mainly symbolic value: The PA has no influence whatsoever on Palestinian lives there.

This also applies to much of the West Bank, as well as the Gaza Strip, which has been controlled by Hamas since 2007. The PA only administers urban centres in the West Bank. But unlike its name suggests, it has anything but authority. It's forced to coordinate with

Israel in almost all areas, not to say request *permission* from the occupying power, even now in the case of the planned elections.

That's why it's mainly outsiders who still believe in the two-state solution.

The PA, and with it the governing Fatha party, has lost a great deal of credibility among Palestinians. Since its establishment in 1994, it has not been able to help Palestinians attain a real state worthy of its name.

On the contrary, since signing the Oslo Accords, Israel has continued to expand its settlements in the West Bank and has virtually cemented its claim to all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Israeli settlements with more than 650,000 settlers now stretch throughout the entire West Bank and East Jerusalem, depriving Palestinians of freedom of movement and development opportunities.

Using the word 'apartheid'

That's why it's mainly outsiders who still believe in the two-state solution. Although many Palestinians would like to have their own state, they see that adherence to the principle of two states obscures the reality of the existing – single – state, in which some enjoy civil rights and freedoms and others struggle under a draconian military law.

After 53 years, Israel's occupation could hardly be regarded as 'temporary'. The idea of a two-state solution would amount to nothing more than window dressing, blocking the view on clear human rights violations that are trivialised as a 'temporary evil'. Palestinian analysts and non-governmental organisations have long described Palestinian reality as 'apartheid' – a term that remains taboo in countries like Germany when it comes to discussing Israel.

Israeliheads of governmen like Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert and the former head of Mossad Meir Dagent, however, warned over many years that Israel was turning into an apartheid state. In early 2021, one of the largest Israeli human rights organisations, *B'tselem*, used this term in a widely discussedreport.

Recently, Human Rights Watch, the international heavyweight among human rights organisations, also caused a stir. Applying the Rome Statute's definition of apartheid, Human Rights Watch meticulously outlined the reality in Israel/Palestine. It 213-page report concludes that Israel is committing crimes against humanity, including apartheid and persecution.

The PA pays a high price

This climate might have provided the PA with a last chance to show that it's not finished, that it enjoys democratic legitimacy and perhaps could even lay the foundations of a Palestinian state – should the political winds in Israel change at some point. Currently, only a few Knesset members continue to support the two-state solution as formulated in numerous UN resolutions, while many vehemently oppose it.

Despite Palestinians' deep frustration by the occupation and the PA's performance, they were willing to give it another chance: 93 per cent of eligible voters were registered and a poll revealed that nearly 75 per cent intended to vote. And notwithstanding the massive constraints, there were 36 lists of candidates.

The Americans have also not played a laudable role.

Palestinians are tired of being governed by presidential decree – and in the Gaza Strip, by the Islamist Hamas party. Many were also hopeful that elections would end the political division between the Fatah-governed West Bank and Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

Many political movements such as the social-democratic Palestinian National Initiative demanded that elections be held whether or not Israel agreed. Why ask Israel permission for the right to vote in democratic elections?

The PA and especially its dominant Fatah party are paying a high price for the delay, which seems more like a cancellation. Everyone's saying that the PA is just a pawn in the hands of the Israeli occupiers. Even invoking East Jerusalem can't hide the fact that key people around President Abbas feared losing power in the elections.

American hesitancy

The Americans have also not played a laudable role. To please President-elect Biden and regain US sympathy after years of diplomatic hostility stoked by former President Donald Trump, the Palestinian factions had quickly pulled themselves together and agreed to hold elections.

But now the Americans are conspicuously silent. Unlike the European Union and some of its member states, Washington did not praise the scheduled elections and crucially did not admonish the Israeli government to allow Palestinians in East Jerusalem to vote.

True, the Biden administration has not yet worked out its Middle East policy. And yes, after its fourth election in two years, Israel is bogged down with building a governing coalition and the US doesn't want to butt in. But even if the US did not encourage postponing the elections, its current hesitancy could be decisive with regard to what the Biden administration has once again declared its goal: the two-state solution.

Most Palestinians no longer believe in their leadership and foreign 'solutions'. They are bracing themselves to struggle longer for their rights – rights that are not just violated by the Israeli occupation but also by their own leadership.



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