

position paper

Municipal elections in the westbank: A first step towards inclusive democracy



PalThink for Strategic Studies

Gaza - Palestine

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a first step towards inclusive democracy.**

**Research Unit and Policies
PalThink for Strategic Studies**

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PalThink for Strategic Studies followed the second phase of the electoral process in its second phase with great interest. It was conducted in eleven governorates in the West Bank, including occupied Jerusalem, and was held in fifty local municipalities. Two-hundred thirty-four lists competed in the elections. According to the Chairman of the Central Election Commission, Hanna Nasser, who spoke at the morning press conference in Al-Bireh city on March 26, 2022, independent parties comprised 64.4% of the candidates, while there were 35.6% party lists. The overall turnout was 53% of those eligible to vote despite the challenges of holding regular and permanent elections in all Palestinian areas, sectors, and institutions.

Elections in the Palestinian context mean that the community structures in all their components can manage state institutions democratically and periodically, and that Palestinian society deserves to have an independent state like other societies. In many of its programs in Palestine - the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip - in partnership with local and international institutions, Pal Think seeks to strengthen its community role and promote political participation, especially among youth. Considering the election regulatory which was disrupted by many factors and causes, the Palestinian division was the main factor, which directly affected:

1. Regular elections

Palestinian elections have not been held regularly (and in accordance with the law) since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994. In addition, general and municipal elections were held through factional consensus in 2004-2006. After the 2007 division in Palestinian leadership, the electoral process was completely disrupted.

2. Election's engineering

In 2012 and 2017, municipal elections in addition to some student unions and councils were held in the West Bank governorates but not in the Gaza Strip; there have been no local elections in the Gaza Strip since the (Hamas-Fatah) split. President Mahmoud Abbas issued a decree on holding the elections in January 2021 based on the national consensus, general elections, and the agreement of the National Council of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This was to happen in three stages: legislative, presidential, and national council. Palestine has witnessed political and social mobility, with the Central Electoral

Commission (36) registering an electoral list (of 36 parties) for the Legislative Council.

3. Regional elections

Despite the participation of many forces, either directly or through independent lists, Hamas rejected the elections as "fragmented" and contrary to what was agreed, demanding "*sync, comprehensive elections or a specific timetable*". The vision of other political parties in the Palestinian scene was in between (supporters or opponents) holding municipal elections without public elections.

"We hope that the elections will prevail in all Palestinian territories, not just in the West Bank, and that we will be allowed to hold presidential and legislative elections in all Palestinian territories," President Mahmoud Abbas said after voting on Palestine TV. While Islamic Jihad leader Said Nakhla said that turnout in the ongoing local elections in the West Bank indicates "*the need to give the people the opportunity to choose who represents them at all levels.*"

It is clear from the statements of parties that faith in Palestinian elections is a right, and the problems lie in the mechanisms and consensus of implementation. Nevertheless, we have not seen real movement to address the problems that exist for elections.

Addressing the problems that prevents the elections

Pal Think supports the holding of general and local elections in Palestine and emphasizes their regularity, whatever the results, as a constitutional right. To ensure this, some necessary reforms must be undertaken to rehabilitate the Palestinian political system through legal, political or community reforms. In this aspect, Pal Think Association provides a set of criteria that will help address these problems and promote the holding of elections:

1. Gradual and phased

There are challenges that disrupt elections, but even if general elections cannot be held, local, trade union and student elections can still be held, nonetheless. Holding elections at the local level will reinforce the sincerity of the democratic orientation with this bottom-up approach. Holding elections is a first step to building the path inclusive democracy in Palestine.

2. Election courts:

Through the experience of the 2017 elections, which were cancelled in the Gaza Strip, many problems have emerged. Two examples include having competent courts in the election process and identifying who will secure the election boxes. It is necessary to address them through meaningful and constructive dialogue to overcome all obstacles to the holding of elections in the Gaza Strip.

Based on the above, Pal Think confirms:

- To continue its programmes and activities that support community reconciliation, and promote activities and training aimed at raising awareness of political participation, particularly among youth and women, so that they can participate in the democratic process and vote in elections.
- To support the steps and procedures leading to the elections and take practical steps from all political forces, starting with local elections, which are subject to Palestinian political will in student councils in Gaza and the West Bank, and local bodies in Gaza. These are the unions that eventually lead to elections to the National Council of the PLO.
- To work toward restoring democratic life by ending the political divide, Pal Think will continue its inclusive dialogue approach with all parties, work with local and international partners, and build on previous steps produced by the Foundation such as the Swiss Paper to End the Division.