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BULLETIN

The Palestinian Authority after the Cancellation of Elections

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The cancellation of the 22 May parliamentary elections in the Palestinian Authority (PA) by President Mahmoud Abbas deepens the Palestinian political crisis and contributed to the escalation between Hamas and Israel. The decision is a result of internal disputes in the PA leadership and insufficient external support, primarily from the U.S. The lack of elections will preserve the current political turmoil in the PA and weaken Palestinian relations with Israel.

Context for Calling Elections. Democratic mechanisms in the main PA institutions have been suspended for over a decade. The last presidential election won by Fatah's leader, Abbas, was held in 2005, and the last elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, the 132-member PA parliament, in 2006 were won by Hamas. The success of the organisation, considered a terrorist group by Israel, the U.S., and the EU, escalated into a political crisis. Israel and the Middle East "Quartet" (U.S., UN, EU, Russia) sanctioned the PA and Hamas-led institutions. The Quartet conditioned the restoration of cooperation with Palestinian parties on the adoption of the "Quartet Principles": renouncing violence, recognising Israel, and accepting the previous Israeli-Palestinian accords. Attempts at a compromise between Fatah and Hamas on the establishment of a joint government ended in failure and in open conflict. In 2007, Hamas forcibly took over the Gaza Strip, which de facto meant the separation of the Palestinian territories and institutional paralysis of the PA. Fearing Hamas would win the next elections, Abbas decided not to schedule them and run the PA by decree. The concentration of the decision-making process in the hands of the president resulted in a strengthening of the authoritarian nature of PA politics (reflected in a decline since 2006 to 2020 in the Democracy Index from a "partial democracy" to "authoritarianism").

Since 2007, Fatah and Hamas have repeatedly engaged in unsuccessful reconciliation talks. The announcement of the Trump plan in January 2020 and the threat of annexations in the West Bank prompted a resumption of the talks, which in January 2021 led Abbas to issue a decree calling for the overdue elections. The decision scheduled the PA parliamentary elections for May and the presidential one for July, as well as elections in September for the Palestinian National Council, the legislative body of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, which is formally the international representation of Palestinians and the Palestinian diaspora. Despite the advanced level of the elections process (including voter registration, approval of candidate lists) in April, Abbas announced their indefinite postponement. The indicated reason was that Israel would not allow voting in East Jerusalem, mostly inhabited by the Palestinian population and recognised by Israel as its territory (officially, the Israeli authorities did not take a position on the elections in the PA).

Reasons Behind the Cancellation and the Fallout. The postponement of the elections was primarily the result of political calculations by the current PA leadership. The main challenge became maintaining political consolidation within Fatah. Internal disputes had given rise to a rival list: "Freedom" led by Nasser al-Qudwa (a former diplomat, nephew of Yasser Arafat) and Marwan Barghouti (formally represented by his wife), who is very popular among Palestinians as the leader of Fatah and serving a life sentence in an Israeli prison. Another list, "Future", also submitted candidates for the elections. The list represents Mohammed Dahlan, a close associate of the heir to the UAE throne, Mohamed bin Zayed. Dahlan is the former head of Fatah structures in the Gaza Strip and in sharp conflict with Abbas. The weakening of Fatah was accompanied by concerns about a possible agreement between the opposition and Hamas that would result in the loss of power by the Abbas camp (a joint Fatah-Hamas list

was rejected by the parties). For Hamas, participation in the elections was an opportunity to clearly strengthen its political position and increase public support, especially in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Apart from the internal conditions, international factors also played a role in the postponement. The very calling of elections from the perspective of the PA leadership aimed to send a signal to the new U.S. administration to improve relations, which were in deep crisis during the presidency of Donald Trump. The EU actively participated in the Palestinian electoral process, for example, mediating on allowing voting in East Jerusalem. At the same time, pressure on the Palestinian leadership to cancel the elections was intensified by states fearing a Hamas win, including Egypt, Jordan and Israel itself. The final blow to holding the elections was the attitude of American diplomacy, which decided not to pressure Israel (e.g., on the voting in East Jerusalem) and sent signals to the PA government that the U.S. "will understand" a decision to postpone the elections.

After Abbas cancelled them, he took harsh criticism from Hamas and Palestinian civil society, but the decision itself did not lead to much protest in the PA itself. In terms of image, the cancellation was a serious blow to the Fatah leadership, although they were already increasingly unpopular (e.g., due to cooperation with Israel and corruption) despite earlier preparations to give them the edge in elections, such as reform of the electoral law that liquidated half constituencies, which enabled the Hamas victory in 2006.

The failure to stick to the elections schedule was one of the reasons for the Israeli-Palestinian escalation in May. The launch of Hamas rockets on Israel in response to Israeli actions in Jerusalem had a clear political dimension. The organisation sought to strengthen its social legitimacy and popularity among the Palestinians, which it planned to harvest in the elections. In addition, the projection of power was calculated to confirm it as the main organisation opposing Israel, in contrast to Fatah, alleged to cooperate with it.

The cancellation of the elections was also beneficial from the perspective of the Israeli authorities, both for Benjamin Netanyahu, who is trying to remain PM, and for the opposition if it were to form the next government. Changing the political *status quo* in the PA would open up space for additional conflict (in the event of a Hamas win) or for a return to some form of peace talks, unpopular among some Israelis, especially those in the dominant right-wing electorate.

Perspectives. The cancellation of the elections weakens the Palestinians politically. It strengthens the conflict between Fatah and Hamas, as well as the gap between the public and ruling elite, which benefits from the current political arrangements. It increases the likelihood that undemocratic mechanisms will persist into the future through the succession of Mahmoud Abbas (natural or forced) and will further deepen social frustration. Additionally, repression by the PA apparatus is likely against representatives of the new opposition and those associated with Dahlan.

The fear in regional states, as well as the U.S., about a stronger Hamas and a repeat of the 2006 elections outcome, remains justified. Hamas' declarations in the period between calling elections and their postponement did not indicate any willingness to make concessions, for example, on the adoption of the Quartet Principles. Attempts by the international community to change the organisation's stances, especially after the May escalation, are very unlikely, as is its return to conciliation talks with Fatah. The decision to cancel the vote and the associated pressures show how strong the will is among the PA's current leadership and most of its foreign partners to maintain stability at the expense of the democratisation of the Palestinian territories. At the same time, the cancelation of the elections has created an additional destabilisation factor as Hamas tries to consolidate support among the Palestinians by openly confronting Israel.

Future attempts to break the political stalemate in the PA require reconciling the divergent interests of the key actors, who are at this time uninterested in change and fear an increase in instability. The EU is one entity that has the diplomatic capacity in this regard and has expressed the greatest interest in the return of democratic mechanisms in Palestine. At the same time, it is imperative that the EU provide clear guidelines and expectations for the PA, including linking financial aid more closely with respect for political pluralism and support for civil society. Polish diplomacy can help develop a common approach among Central European states that may prefer their close bilateral relations with Israel over building a coherent EU position—this applies primarily to the stances of Hungary and Czechia.

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