A Requiem for Palestinian Elections

Larry Garber, J Street Policy Fellow | NOVEMBER 19, 2026

Gallanter-Winograd Policy Center
A J Street Initiative

Palestinians watched with considerable interest as citizens of Israel and the United States turned out in large numbers to exercise their franchise and vote for political change. The outcomes in both countries will undoubtedly affect Palestinian aspirations for a better future. However, Palestinians also experienced a tinge of electoral envy as their opportunity to select a new legislative council through the ballot box and thereby to assume a modicum of political agency has once again been postponed.

Palestinian presidential and legislative elections are now scheduled for September 11, 2027. Mahmoud Abbas remains President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), ruling by decree in the absence of a legislature. The PA has little credibility among the Palestinian population and its governance writ is limited to the West Bank. In Gaza, Hamas has expressed a willingness to hand over civilian authority to the Board of Peace-appointed National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG), but Israel has not been supportive of allowing the NCAG to enter Gaza, and the NCAG itself is unwilling to enter until Hamas disarms. Palestinians thus wonder whether conditions on the ground and internal political incentives will shift enough to permit elections in 2027, or, for that matter, anytime in the near future.

Recommendations

- While addressing Palestinian humanitarian and security needs remains the immediate priority, preparing for and actually conducting Palestinian elections should remain high on the agenda of both Palestinian leaders and the international community.
- Consistent with Point 19 of President Trump's Peace Plan, the United States should join the European Union in encouraging democratic elections in Palestine and in providing financial and technical support to the Palestinian Central Election Commission (CEC) to ensure that it can conduct credible elections in September 2027 or, preferably, earlier.
- Israel should take affirmative steps to facilitate the holding of Palestinian elections by allowing the CEC to operate freely within the Palestinian territories, by permitting the participation of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, and by authorizing the presence of international observers (not just on election day, but to allow monitoring of the entire election process).

Palestine's Year of Democracy

At the January 2026 meeting of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas proclaimed 2026 as the year of elections for Palestinians. Elections were seen as necessary to restore public legitimacy to the Palestinian leadership and as a proactive response to international calls for PA reform. Local elections were held on April 25, including in one Gaza municipality, and the CEC was widely praised for its successful technical administration. Legislative elections were scheduled for November 28.

Palestinians last went to the polls to elect a Legislative Council in January 2006, with Hamas winning a majority of the seats. A year later, after a brief civil war in Gaza, Hamas assumed political control over the Strip, while Fatah remained in charge of the West Bank. Following the division,

Abbas began relying on presidential decrees to effect changes in law, and the Legislative Council was formally abolished in December 2018.

On January 15, 2021, Abbas issued a decree scheduling legislative elections for May 22 and presidential elections for July 31. Three weeks before the election date, Abbas issued a decree postponing the elections, citing Israel's refusal to allow polling booths in East Jerusalem, even in a symbolic manner as had occurred for previous legislative elections. However, analysts attributed Abbas' decision to fears that deep political divisions within Fatah would once again allow Hamas to emerge as the largest party. Moreover, at the time, the response from the United States and the international community to moving forward with elections was lukewarm at best.

The scheduling of legislative elections for November 2026 thus drew mixed reactions among the Palestinian public. Elections were seen both as a mechanism to begin restoring the legitimacy of Palestinian governance institutions and as part of the reform process demanded by international interlocutors, particularly in Europe. Moreover, by conducting elections under challenging circumstances, Palestinians could demonstrate a degree of independent agency rather than being seen as reliant exclusively on external actors.

At the same time, the devastation in Gaza and the recurrent violence in the West Bank remain the overriding concerns of the population. Skepticism abounds as to whether elections would alleviate either of these realities. Moreover, there was always the suspicion that Abbas, as happened in 2021, would not allow the elections to happen unless he was confident that his Fatah faction would emerge victorious. According to an August public opinion survey, a majority of Palestinians wanted the elections to proceed even if conditions were not ideal, and an even larger majority were skeptical that they would actually take place.

Preparing for November Elections

The November 28 elections were intended to form a 132-member Legislative Council. Seats were to be allocated proportionally, with party lists receiving seats based on the percentage of the vote that they received across the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. Candidates on party lists were required to affirm their recognition of "the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, its national and political platforms, and relevant international resolutions."

Throughout the summer, the Palestinian Central Election Commission (CEC) diligently prepared for the elections. Despite the carnage and massive displacement in Gaza, the CEC updated the voter lists, which eventually included more than 1.5 million eligible voters on the West Bank list, 1.239 million on the Gaza list, and 140,000 from Jerusalem. Responding to a CEC decree, three political party and eight independent lists submitted their paperwork for inclusion on the ballot between September 26 and October 10.

November Elections Postponed

Despite the considerable fanfare, on October 10, Abbas issued a decree postponing the elections from November 28 until September 11, 2027. The decree said the postponement was necessary because CEC staff and international observers were prevented from accessing the Gaza Strip and Jerusalem, and because of exceptional security and humanitarian conditions. The decree further

referenced as grounds for postponement “the consensus on the Israeli obstacles, mainly, and the intention for an inclusive and comprehensive national dialogue.”

Not all Palestinian factions agreed with the decision. Mohammed Dahlan, a former Fatah leader from Gaza currently living in the United Arab Emirates, condemned the postponement “as a crime that is tantamount to a violation of democracy.” Similarly, Mustafa Bargouti, head of the Palestine National Initiative, which had registered for the election, said the decision to postpone represented an “agreement among some Palestinian factions, not all Palestinian forces.” For its part, Hamas supported the postponement, while indicating it could be justified only if it led “to a comprehensive, serious, and productive national dialogue.” Various European governments and the European Union voiced concern about the postponement, but the United States, as it had in 2021, remained silent.

Explaining the Postponement

Palestinian officials and analysts have offered various explanations for why the elections were postponed. Without doubt, the security and humanitarian conditions on the ground create serious challenges for the proper conduct of a conventional electoral exercise. And laying the blame for these conditions on Israel is always a point-scoring political argument in the Palestinian context. However, the CEC had developed innovative contingency plans to account for and work around the obstacles. November elections would have been far from perfect, but the CEC believed it could deliver a process that allowed Palestinians to make meaningful choices among competing parties.

A second reason suggested by some analysts is that conducting elections under current circumstances would allow Hamas, particularly in Gaza, to influence prospective voters by providing them with much-needed services and to intimidate them with threats of violence. Disarming Hamas will require the deployment of a multinational force and will take time. The decree requiring candidates to affirm acceptance of PLO agreements, designed to preclude Hamas participation, was unlikely to have much political effect. Hamas-designated candidates could compete under a different party name and rationalize the requisite affirmation.

The proposed alternative is to proceed with a genuine and inclusive national dialogue, which would forge unity among Palestinian factions, negotiate a formula for an interim governance arrangement, and schedule elections down the road. In July 2024, 14 factions, including Fatah and Hamas, agreed on specific reconciliation steps following a meeting in Beijing, China, but they were not implemented. Hence, many Palestinians question whether the convening of another national dialogue is a valid basis for postponing the elections.

A final reason cited by analysts is Fatah's concern that the party would suffer a stinging reprimand if elections were held now. As the long-time dominant actor in the PLO and PA, Fatah is blamed for the current plight of the Palestinians, with many of its leaders viewed as being out-of-touch or corrupt or both. Moreover, longstanding internal divisions within Fatah further weaken the party’s electoral prospects, leaving the possibility that Hamas or a newly emerging contestant could win the most seats in the legislature. The PA, meanwhile, has failed to adopt a legal framework for registering new parties, which, together with the harassment and arrest of political opposition figures and critical journalists, creates a repressive political environment. Ultimately, Abbas likely calculated that neither Israel nor the United States wanted to risk a Hamas victory and thus would be unlikely to protest a decision to postpone the elections.

What Next?

Elections are not necessarily everyone's priorities. Facing the harsh conditions of an upcoming winter in Gaza and threats of settler violence in the West Bank, understandably, Palestinians may not care whether an elected Palestinian leadership or an internationally-appointed body is responsible for improving their lives and ensuring their personal security.

In Gaza specifically, Palestinians desperately need increased humanitarian deliveries, adequate shelters, the resumption of regular education programs, and the start of the reconstruction process. And the potentially transformed political environment, both in Israel and the United States, may offer more immediate opportunities for change than could be achieved through the election of new Palestinian leaders.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to place Palestinian elections on the proverbial back burner. Palestinians deserve the opportunity to choose their leadership and to have a voice in shaping their future. Continued postponement only deepens public frustration and further weakens confidence in Palestinian political institutions.

Palestinians, particularly the 50 percent of eligible voters who are too young to have participated in a prior national election, yearn to take part in a democratic process and may support new political entrants into an electoral competition. They appreciate the CEC's persistent and innovative efforts to ensure that credible elections are feasible in Palestine, whenever the political elite allows them to happen. They have watched many national dialogues convene and are aware that their track record of effecting change is not encouraging. Finally, they are well aware that their friends in Europe and elsewhere support the establishment of a democratic and economically successful Palestinian state.

While Hamas must be disarmed, eliminating Hamas as a political actor is not a feasible goal. Thus, the approach adopted by the PA of requiring all political factions to operate under the PLO umbrella and to accept existing agreements signed by the PLO could facilitate Hamas' transformation from a militant group to a political player in a democratic Palestine.

Credible Palestinian elections will require the cooperation of Israel. October 7 upended the idea that maintaining a political division between Gaza and the West Bank, and playing off Hamas against Fatah, serves Israeli security interests. Israel should recognize that facilitating the emergence of democratic and effective Palestinian institutions reinforces prospects for peaceful relations between the two peoples. To this end, Israel must allow the CEC personnel and materials to move freely between and within the West Bank and Gaza, and to shore up, rather than denigrate and undermine, the PA and other bodies operating under the PA umbrella.

Conclusion

Elections are essential but not the only components of a liberal democracy. And establishing democratic institutions neither guarantees peaceful relations between countries nor necessarily improves societal well-being. Yet, as was evident in both Israel and the United States, they do provide a vehicle for those with grievances to express themselves without the use of violence and provide a sense of hope for an otherwise discontented populace.