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Fatah faces huge vote threat over divisions, Hamas

by Hisham Abdallah

RAMALLAH, West Bank - Fatah faces an unprecedented threat to its long stranglehold on power at next week's Palestinian election, brought on by internal party divisions and the rise of the Islamists of Hamas.

Analysts and senior party figures say that the movement established by Yasser Arafat more than 40 years ago is in real danger of losing its majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council with voters fed up by Fatah's failure to tackle corruption and advance the peace process with Israel.

Polls have shown Hamas, contesting its first parliamentary campaign, rapidly running down Fatah's lead ahead of the January 25 ballot despite belated efforts by the ruling faction to put on a show of unity.

Fatah only narrowly agreed on a single list of candidates after a stand-off between the old guard and reformist wings of the party which managed to keep their rival agendas in check during the Arafat era.

"The current situation is one of the most difficult that Fatah has ever seen and I can say that Fatah now is threatened with losing its majority," said Sakher Bissou, deputy general secretary of Fatah's Revolutionary Council and a member of the party's campaign team.

Bissou said the crisis facing Fatah had been brewing since a decade ago when the last, and to date only, parliamentary elections took place.

"The situation now is the accumulation of the last 10 years -- not making any progress on the peace process, the internal conflicts within Fatah and the divisions that accompanied the formation of the list."

The battle over the list of candidates was led by supporters of the jailed uprising leader Marwan Barghuti who were furious that an initial line-up was dominated by old-timers such as the prime minister Ahmed Qorei.

Aware that Barghuti is the biggest draw for Fatah, the establishment had little choice but to rewrite the list but resentment has lingered.

Former cabinet minister Qadurra Fares, a key ally of Barghuti, tried to put a brave face on things by insisting that the divisions within Fatah were over.

He acknowledged, however, that its grip on office was loosening.

"Fatah is facing an unprecedented challenge," Fares told AFP. "There is a real threat that Fatah could lose the majority to Hamas."

Hisham Ahmed, an analyst at Birzeit university near Ramallah, agreed that Fatah could well lose its majority in the 132-chamber after next Wednesday, partly as a result of no clear leadership since Arafat's death 14 months ago.

Fatah is nominally led by the hardliner Faruq Qaddumi who continues to live in exile in Tunis, while Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas chairs meetings of the decision-making central committee in Ramallah.

"They lost Arafat and haven't really replaced him. He was the main unifying factor," said Ahmed.

"At the same time, Fatah left the door open to other movements such as Hamas.

"They have been engaging with different issues -- social welfare, education, health -- while Fatah has been busy on much less significant matters" such as internal politics, said Ahmed.

Hamas has campaigned against the culture of corruption that has taken hold under Fatah while the failure of Abbas to tackle a growing security crisis has also done little to help Fatah's electoral prospects.

But Ahmed believes the lack of any progress in the peace process between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel is another key factor in persuading people to either vote Hamas or at least stay home on polling day.

"The failure in the peace process is something that ordinary people automatically translate into a failure by Fatah and the PA," he said.

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