

Hisham Ahmed

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"Looking for real change"

an interview with Hisham Ahmed

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This week Palestine Report Online interviews professor of political science at Birzeit University, Hisham Ahmed, on the formation of a new government.

PR: The formation of a new government has proven to be very problematic. Why?

Ahmed: The formation of a new government has been long awaited. If you cast your mind back awhile, the outgoing government was supposed to come before the Legislative Council for approval before the death of Yasser Arafat. Then, there was a lot of controversy regarding the performance and effectiveness of this government.

Much has transpired since, all conspiring to delay a discussion on this government. After the presidential elections, and the announcement of the calm with Israel, it has become pertinent to engage in a serious discussion to form a new government capable of meeting the many challenges the Palestinian people face, external and internal alike.

Since last week, it was pretty clear that PM Ahmed Qrei' was about to form a new government with more or less the same faces as before. This would have meant a new government filled with those whose performance and effectiveness had already been questioned. Hence the conflict between the PM and the PLC. But there is also an undeclared controversy between the PM and the PLC on the one hand and the Palestinian people on the other. People have been waiting for a government composed of able, qualified, and talented people skilled to do the jobs at hand. In other words, the expectation all along was two-fold: to place the right person in the right position and to do away with corruption in its human and material dimensions.

PR: You say the PLC objected to the PM trying to form the usual government. What's wrong with that composition?

Ahmed: From the vantage point of the people, there has been a lot of dismay over the repetition of the same old thing. There has been profound disenchantment with the process of regurgitating the composition of governments. Some ministers suggested have been around all along. They have become viewed, ironically, as part of the fixed national principles. The problem is people have not seen progress, on the contrary: we have regressed, in the political sphere and in the social and economic spheres. Maintaining the same faces has created a gap between the rulers and the ruled, and people are looking for change, real change.

PR: Are PLC members responding to what people are demanding or are members acting out of their own interests?

Ahmed: We need to analyze the situation in terms of the PM and the PLC on the one hand and the rest of society on the other hand. Since 1996, the PLC, from the vantage point of many, has been inept, ineffective, and has not delivered. Parliament has not projected an effective

legislative authority to the Palestinian people and the rest of the world. More often than not, PLC members have been mainly concerned about their self-interests.

Now, the fact that members take such strident steps against the formation of a new government months before Legislative Council elections is raising eyebrows. It appears to be a kind of pre-election campaigning more than anything else. People are not really convinced that the steps that are being taken by the PLC are genuine and sincere and are in the interests of the people. As a matter of fact, it is no exaggeration to say that many feel the crux of many internal problems is due to the ineffectiveness of the parliament. Many feel the PLC expired a long time ago and that many members should resign to maintain the respect and dignity for the legislative authority.

PR: What you are saying is that people really have an eye out on the elections in July?

Ahmed: No doubt about it. The dynamics behind being so ardent about the formation of a new government now is that PLC members want to guarantee their reelection either by becoming ministers themselves or by projecting an image of strength.

PR: Qrei' appears to be under a lot of pressure. Will he survive now, or, if he does, later after the PLC elections?

Ahmed: It is always difficult to predict. If I were to lend the PM some advice, I would say he has an unprecedented chance to declare in public his decision to step aside from political life in recognition of people's desire for fundamental change. If he were to do so, he would be in a position to maintain more credibility in the eyes of the people and set in motion new measures on the internal level. If he doesn't, he faces the possibility of either having his efforts to form a new government further challenged by a tenacious PLC, or he will form a weak government without the support of the legislature which might endeavor in the months up to the elections to challenge the government at all turns, so members can prove themselves in front of the people.

PR: For all the pressures and interests, however, do you think this is a healthy debate?

Ahmed: We should never lose sight of the fact that despite the side effects of what's going on, the nature and the content of the debate demonstrates beyond doubt that the spirit of democracy among Palestinians is alive and well, and Palestinians have a plurality of political views. This is healthy as long as one keeps the national interests at heart. Perhaps it's high time for everyone to pay more attention to the complexity of the challenges facing the people internally and externally. Both the legislature and the executive branch need to form a solid shield for President [Mahmoud] Abbas to support him in this difficult time.

It is also time to pay real and genuine attention to the economic, social and educational needs of the average Palestinian, to move beyond the symbolic to the concrete and practical. Short of that I fear we will continue to revolve in a cycle that leads us nowhere. -Published February 23, 2005©Palestine Report