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The PLC must act responsibly

an interview with Hisham Ahmed

This week Palestine Report Online interviews Hisham Ahmed, professor of political Science at Birzeit University on the possible delay of PLC elections.

PR: What's your take on the possible delay to hold PLC elections?

Ahmed: From the vantage point of the ordinary Palestinian, PLC members simply appear engaged in trying to maintain their own positions. PLC members have kept their seats for the last ten years and have by far exceeded the time span people thought they would be there.

Also, another crisis was created some two months ago when the new government was formed. There was quite an obvious and adamant attempt to complicate the formation of that government, and the image that was created was that each and every member was interested in his or her own position and to become minister.

PR: You are here talking about public perception. Do you think this is a correct perception?

Ahmed: I think the performance of the PLC leaves a lot to be desired. It was quite disheartening to many Palestinians that, three days ago, when the Central Elections Committee demanded that the new elections law be approved, most PLC members were out of Ramallah, were not in session, obviously in order to complicate the passing of the new bylaws.

Add to that that over the past ten years, not many concrete results have been accomplished by the PLC. In most countries, the parliament is perhaps the most effective authority. Here, the performance, the projection, the involvement of the PLC has been quite disheartening to Palestinian society.

PR: There is a scheduled vote April 20 on the new elections law. What do you expect to happen?

Ahmed: It is very hard to say. It is my sincere hope that PLC members will gather and act in a manner that is responsive to the demands of Palestinian society, although going on previous record, it won't be surprising that that attempt will be complicated. But it is possible that they will pull their act together in order to maintain the projected date for PLC elections on July 17.

PR: Hamas has made very clear that it won't accept at least a long delay. How is this affecting the PLC considerations?

Ahmed: There are two dimensions. The conventional wisdom has it that the blame for the postponement is Fateh's. I think it's important to understand that there are many voices in Fateh demanding that elections be held on time. It seems to me that some PLC members utilize the name of Fateh in order to legitimize their attempts to postpone the elections.

Second, given the fact that there are new groups that intend to contest the elections, i.e., the Islamic groups, i.e., Hamas, postponing the elections would indeed create some internal problems vis-à-vis such groups, in addition to deepening frustrations throughout society.

There is also a connection between holding the elections on time and maintaining the calm. The longer the period before holding the elections, the more probable that the calm could collapse, simply out of frustration on the part of too many people out there in society. I fear this issue, and the PLC must act responsibly and responsively.

PR: Will Hamas pull out of the elections if these are postponed?

Ahmed: I don't believe that a postponement will trigger a decision by Hamas to pull out of the elections. On the contrary, it will give Hamas very strong material to capitalize on in its campaign for such elections, and will only help Hamas solidify its position, by enabling it to put the blame on another group for the postponement.

PR: This is not the only delay being talked about. It seems Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has decided perhaps to delay his Gaza withdrawal. What do you make of this?

Ahmed: This is another complication. With the delay of the so-called withdrawal, i.e., the implementation of Sharon's own plan for Gaza, and if the PLC elections were to be delayed, I think this would open the door quite wide for a lot of turmoil to ensue in the conflict. Frustration upon frustration is bound to aggravate Palestinians, perhaps even to engage in another Intifada especially since not too many of their demands have been met, vis-à-vis political prisoners, settlements, Jerusalem and so on and so forth. There are already many frustrations, and if people feel there are no incentives down the road, we might see another round of clashes.

PR: So a delay on both counts could really be detrimental to the calm.

Ahmed: I'm afraid so. -Published April 20, 2005©Palestine Report