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Fatah Primary Results: Lessons from the First Round

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In preparation for January elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), Fatah, the mainstream Palestinian faction that dominates the current council, held its first ever primaries on November 25.

Though flaws in the primary balloting highlighted Fatah's broader organizational and political difficulties, the results from the initial rounds represent a major victory for Fatah's "young guard" leadership headed by the imprisoned Marwan Barghouti. As imperfect and incomplete as the primaries have been, the first round of voting validates the popularity of Fatah's younger generation, which has been struggling for years to wrest control of the movement from the "old guard" that dominates Fatah's Central Committee and its other governing institutions.

The Problematic Mechanics of the Primaries

For months, the Fatah leadership has been debating how the primaries would be held. Fatah's primary process has been overseen by the Fatah Election Supervision Committee, a body composed of members of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, though the Central Committee has often influenced the election committee's decisions.

Because of numerous political and technical questions, at least two previously scheduled dates for the primaries were postponed. With an early December deadline looming for official registration of candidates for the January 25 general elections, Fatah finally moved to hold primaries in five of sixteen electoral districts (Bethlehem, Jenin, Nablus, Ramallah, and Tubas), all in the West Bank, representing about 30 percent of the Palestinian voting population.

The various committees finally agreed in mid-November, just days before primaries were scheduled to occur, on the system for voting. Voting is district-based. Even though the mixed electoral system divides the PLC into sixty-six seats drawn from sixteen districts and sixty-six seats determined proportionally based on national lists, Fatah primary voters in each district selected candidates for twice the number of seats allotted to each district. For example, five of the sixty-six district seats are reserved for Ramallah, so Fatah voters in Ramallah cast ballots for up to ten candidates, five for the district list and five for the national list. Once the ten primary winners are determined, a "committee of the wise" headed by Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and members of the Fatah Central Committee will determine which of the winners will run for direct election from their district and which will run, and in what order, on Fatah's national list. Moreover, in determining the final Fatah lists, the committee of the wise will be able to substitute names from a larger list for primary winners, effectively giving Abbas and the old guard a veto over who will represent Fatah in the general elections. In the event that the committee of the wise chooses to replace a primary winner with someone from the larger list who did not succeed in the primaries, it must provide a detailed explanation of the reasons behind the switch.

This complicated primary system highlights several problems. Fatah's decision to determine its candidates on both the district and national slates based only on local popularity defeats the purpose of having a national list.

More fundamentally, because of the influential role given to the committee of the wise, the primaries themselves serve only the limited role of informing the committee which candidates are most popular among Fatah members at the district level.

The primaries thus will be only as influential as the committee of the wise allows them to be. The committee must determine whether the primary results accurately reflect how well individual Fatah candidates will do in the general election when competing against Hamas candidates and independents. If the committee of the wise is most interested in maximizing Fatah's electoral potential, it will adhere to the results of the primaries, but there is nothing to prevent its members from manipulating the list to better serve individual interests. Barghouti and his allies have already declared that they will not accept a list on which appointees have replaced elected candidates because the primaries a democratic process that cannot be reversed.

Because of the fluidity of decisionmaking by Fatah's leadership, it remains to be seen how the remaining eleven districts will hold primaries or reach compromises to appoint candidates. For now, primaries in Hebron and Jerusalem are scheduled to take place this week while Tulkarem and Qalqilya will not conduct primaries. Primaries in all five of Gaza's districts have been canceled due to repeated violence directed against polling stations and election officials. The chaos in Gaza weakens Fatah's chances of competing with Hamas there in the general elections.

Outcome of the Primaries

It is too soon to conclude that the primaries that were held took place in a fair and transparent manner. Already, there are many complaints of fraud and irregularities. The balloting occurred without outside monitoring. Moreover, the preparation for the voting was so hurried that it is unclear whether voters even knew the location of their polling stations and whether those polling stations were suitably equipped. Turnout and registration numbers are also suspect; Fatah had no clear criteria for who could register. Comparing Fatah's turnout in the primaries to the votes received by Abbas in the January presidential election—a measure of Fatah's mobilization—reveals wildly inconsistent numbers except in Ramallah.

While only partial results from the November 25 primaries have been declared officially, it is clear that the majority of the winners in each of the five districts come from the younger generation of Fatah members who were local leaders during the first and second intifadas, and whose chief national leader is Barghouti. More than 192 candidates competed for forty nominations in five districts. While not every winner is directly associated with Barghouti's political faction or the grassroots Fatah Tanzim he founded, most of those who succeeded in the polls share Barghouti's critique of the corruption of the current regime and sympathize with his views of Israel. Barghouti himself received nearly 33,000 votes, far and away the highest total of any candidate; 95 percent of Ramallah voters included him on their lists. Most winners are in their thirties and forties; many are educated professionals who are widely respected in their communities. In Jenin and Nablus, leaders of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades finished atop the polling. Though their allegiances do not rest firmly with Barghouti's faction, they often collaborated during the second intifiada.

The biggest losers in the primaries were members of the old guard and incumbent members of the PLC. Only four sitting legislators won their primaries; at least seven failed. The only Fatah Central Committee member to seek election, Ramallah's Sakher Habash, received only 2,000 votes. Many other current leaders chose not to compete. A few senior members of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, such as Azzam al-Ahmed of Jenin and Mahmoud Aloul of Nablus, did succeed at the polls, but these individuals command great respect locally and are more the exception than the rule.

Looking ahead to January

Fatah's younger generation may have won a resounding victory in the November 25 primaries, but it would be premature to conclude that leadership of Fatah has been usurped by the young guard. The movement's elders still have the final say on who will represent Fatah in the general elections. It remains to be seen how many of

their own candidates they will impose on the party list.

The primaries certainly advanced the credibility of Fatah's younger generation, but the great difficulties encountered in holding polls even in a few districts underscores the level of dysfunction within the movement. If Fatah wishes to convince the Palestinian public that it can serve as a more effective governing party than its record over the last decade suggests, it still has far to go.

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