

WORLD

Palestinian Authority President Postpones Parliamentary Vote

May elections would have been first vote in West Bank, Gaza since 2006



President Mahmoud Abbas, second left, speaks during a leadership meeting of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the West Bank city of Ramallah. PHOTO: PALESTINIAN PRESIDENT OFFICE/ZUMA PRESS

By [Felicia Schwartz](#)
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JERUSALEM—The Palestinian Authority said Friday it would postpone [parliamentary elections scheduled for next month](#) amid lingering questions over whether Palestinians in East Jerusalem could participate in the vote and a predicted poor performance by the West Bank’s ruling party, Fatah.

Israel has said it wouldn’t interfere with the vote, but hasn’t made clear whether a relatively small number of Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem —about 6,000 in total—would be allowed to cast ballots under Israeli supervision. Palestinians view their participation as an important symbol of their claims to East Jerusalem, which Israel annexed after capturing it in the 1967 war. Mr. Abbas said his efforts to urge international powers to press Israel to allow the vote in East Jerusalem have so far failed.

“Facing this difficult situation, we have decided to postpone the legislative elections until we make sure that Jerusalem and its people can participate,” Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said in an early morning speech after a meeting of Palestinian factions.

The fate of Jerusalem is one of the most sensitive issues in the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel claims the undivided city of Jerusalem as its capital, while the Palestinians claim East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza for a future state. In recent days, tensions have escalated sharply as Palestinians have clashed with Israeli police in the Old City over disputes about nightly Ramadan gatherings.

The Palestinian election commission says about 150,000 voters can cast votes on the outskirts of East Jerusalem, without any need for Israeli permission.

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Israel last allowed voting to take place in East Jerusalem in 2006 following U.S. pressure. Analysts say Israel is unlikely to allow any votes to be cast there so long as the political and militant group Hamas is on the ballot. “The chances that Israel will allow Palestinian elections to take place in Jerusalem is very, very little,” said Michael Milstein, a former senior official in the Israeli military branch that liaises with the Palestinians.

Mr. Abbas in January set the parliamentary elections for May 22 and presidential elections for July 31. Elections for the Palestinian National Council, which includes representatives of Palestinians abroad, were set for Aug. 31.

Mr. Abbas’s January announcement brought Palestinians closer to a vote, but many in the West Bank remained skeptical it would take place. “We are in an internal struggle between the political factions, each with its interests,” said Ahmad Shaltaf, 32, who voted in 2005 and 2006.

Fears have been growing that Fatah would lose power to Islamist group Hamas, which is considered a terrorist group by Israel, the U.S. and other world powers. After Hamas won a surprise victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel, the U.S. and much of the rest of the world refused to engage with its government.

Reconciliation efforts between Hamas and Fatah to form one government have repeatedly failed.

Hamas said it rejects the postponement of the election and accused Mr. Abbas’s Fatah of doing so under grounds “that have nothing to do with Jerusalem,” where the group said Palestinians should force Israel to accept the holding of elections. It didn’t send any representatives to the Thursday meeting in Ramallah, the Palestinian Authority’s seat of power in the West Bank, aimed at deciding whether to cancel the vote.

“We took this move so that our participation will not be used as a cover up for undermining this national end that has long been awaited by our Palestinian people,” Hamas said in a statement.

Palestinians in the West Bank haven’t voted for representatives in over 15 years. Mr. Abbas, 85, is in the 16th year of what was supposed to be a four-year term he won in 2005. He is increasingly [unpopular among young Palestinians](#) who are frustrated with official corruption, dysfunctional government and poor infrastructure.

More than 100 Palestinians gathered in Ramallah overnight to protest the postponement of the elections, chanting “the people want self-determination,” calling for liberation and saying they refused injustice and oppression by the Palestinian Authority and Israel.

“Postponing the elections makes me sad,” said Zeena Farah, 25, who works at a museum. She considered the vote critical to “bringing the change we long for through a democratic process.”

—Fatima AbdulKarim in Ramallah contributed to this article.

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