

Transcript

Vladimir Pran: Hi, my name is Vladimir Pran, and I am Senior Governance Advisor with Adam Smith International. In the past, I used to work on elections in quite a few places, starting with National Democratic Institute (NDI), and then also working with UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and I will be talking today about the elections that were sort of historical elections in Palestine in 2006, and be telling a little bit of my experience of those elections and what's my story and how I saw them, how elections were conducted in terms of administrative and procedural point of view, but we'll also be talking a bit of politics and what that meant, what the elections meant for Palestinians and Israelis and their relationships, as well as lessons learned that were quite unique because of the electoral system that was used in Palestine.

So, I first arrived to Palestine in 2004 in September on the request of NDI, National Democratic Institute, to help audit the voters list. Palestinians were preparing for local elections, and the Central Election Commission started registering voters, in hope that also that voters list one day will be used for national elections, legislative and presidential elections. Those, however, were not on the horizon. While the local elections were scheduled, and back then, Chairman Arafat allowed them to go ahead, the legislative and presidential elections were not even on the horizon. He was not particularly keen to have them. Long story short, just a few weeks after I arrived and started auditing the voters list, President Chairman Arafat ended up in hospital and shortly died in November 2004. And so, suddenly, there was an opportunity to work on legislative and presidential elections, as Palestinian Basic Law required Palestinians to hold those elections within a very short timeframe.

What happened was that the interim president of the Palestinian Authority then called for elections. And, however, they thought that it would be a bit too much to have both legislative and presidential elections at the same time, so they went ahead with presidential elections in January 2005, when President Abbas was elected overwhelmingly.

President Abbas then postponed those elections until July 2005, primarily because of political reasons. There were negotiations with Hamas, which emerged as the second largest faction in Palestine, over bringing them into the political process and sort of broadening participation of Palestinians and to give more credibility to the newly elected Parliament. At the same time, he was also negotiating within his own party, and the negotiation was over the electoral system. Palestinians in previous elections in 1996 were using the so-called block vote system, it is sometimes in Palestine called "old Jordanian system" and it is effectively used for environments without political parties.

The block vote system is a plurality system where a certain number of seats are elected from a district, and where the voters in theory, vote for individual candidates. So they have multiple votes, in the, multi-seat districts. The effect of that is that voters, in theory, vote for individuals, but in practice, they really vote for blocks. And when I say blocks, that means that individuals who are effectively belonging to a certain political party, although that political party might not be even

registered on the ballot. But people who are voting, they know who belongs to which party, so very often, they will just mark all the candidates from the party as a block. So that was a system that was used in '96. It was somewhat problematic, but not super challenging, because there was no real opposition to Fatah in '96.

In 2005, the situation was different. Hamas started emerging in local elections as a serious opposition to Fatah, and what we could see is an enormous effect of the block vote system. It gives quite a significant advantage to the better organized candidates. We could see across Palestine in 2005, between the presidential and legislative elections, how in local elections, in areas where Fatah even has stronger popular support, it's losing elections. Hamas would be simply getting a disproportionate number of seats compared to the popular support that they are receiving. Sometimes they would even have less candidates than the number of seats in the council, but they would still win a majority in the council, just because they were better organized and voters were better disciplined in selecting their candidates.

On the other hand, we saw how Fatah just doesn't have mechanisms to decide who their candidates are, agree on the candidates' affiliations and discipline them. So, we had a situation that two or three Fatah candidates would be running effectively for one seat. They were splitting the votes, they were undermining their legitimacy and credibility as a party, and their voters simply were shopping around, meaning sometimes they would vote for some Fatah candidates, sometimes they would vote for other candidates. That cost them a lot in the local elections, and that effect was very obvious to us, international community, international experts, who were monitoring closely those elections.

That was also obvious to President Abbas. He realized that he cannot go into elections with this kind of system, because he saw how Fatah is disunited and will not be able to win the vote. So he was negotiating with his own party how to switch to the proportional system. He wasn't successful, because Fatah politicians realized that if there will be a proportional list system, that means that somebody will be deciding who's on the list, and that will be a centralized decision. Effectively, it meant that President Abbas would be deciding who will be the candidates, and what will be the ranking order of the candidates on the list. So in the end, they struck a compromise where half of the Parliament was going to be elected under the block vote system, the old system with individual candidates in the district, with multi-seat districts, and part of the parliament, half of the parliament will be with the proportional national list system, through the closed list system.

And so, in this kind of environment, we were going toward the legislative elections in 2006,, with another challenge being on the way, and the challenge was Israel.

Israel realized that the potential of Hamas coming to power through this block vote system is significant. What was the reason... why did Israelis understand the electoral system and the advantage that Hamas is getting? Simply because they're very present in the West Bank. Through their occupation structures, through the civil administration called, Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), through their military and civilian infrastructure in the West Bank, they were closely following electoral developments during local elections in 2005 in the

West Bank, and they saw a similar thing to what we saw. They saw that the candidates of Hamas, although not having overwhelming popular support, are winning the elections. And they were convinced that Hamas would be winning legislative elections. They tried to convince the American administration, which was very interested in Palestinians having elections, that it's a mistake to have elections. They tried to postpone them, they tried to deflect them. But ultimately, they were not successful, as the Bush administration back then was very insistent that Palestinian elections should be going ahead.

On our side, we were also trying to explain the downsides of the block vote system to the international community, to the Quartet. Quartet was composed of the United States, Russia, European Union, and the UN, and Quartet was one of the instrumental groups for pushing for Palestinian reforms that included elections. And that all was happening in the framework of the so-called Roadmap. Roadmap was the Bush administration peace plan or resolution of the conflict, and for eventual path to Palestinian sovereignty and Palestinian state. So within that roadmap, the obligations of Palestinians were that they should have elections, and the American administration and Europeans, EU, were really advocating for a strong legislative assembly, and the renewal of the leadership in Palestinian Authority.

So that being said, they pressed really hard on the Israeli government to allow for elections to go ahead to the point where they invited Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, to Washington, really doubling down their efforts and asking for Israelis to allow Palestinian elections to go ahead.

The one last obstacle was whether elections will be happening in the city of Jerusalem. Prime Minister Sharon was refusing to allow Palestinians to conduct elections in Jerusalem, which were supposed to be held under the Oslo Framework Agreement, where Palestinians have a certain number of polling centers in the city. Sharon was adamant that he will not allow voting in Jerusalem in elections in which Hamas is participating. However, in the end, two weeks before Election Day, he accepted, and elections went ahead in those post offices that serve as a polling station. So there was enormous pressure on both the Palestinians, and the Israelis, to have those elections. That pressure was coming from outside. However, Palestinians were very excited to have first proper elections in which proper opposition was participating.

Unfortunately, what happened was that despite elections being administered in a very, very good way. Central Election Commission of Palestine was supported by international community, built up by international community, enjoyed significant expertise by international consultants. Every department in the commission had specialized consultant helping them putting together systems. The Election Commission performed really, really well, and we still think that it's one of the better, if not the best, election commissions in the Middle East. Decent capacity, proper mandate, independent and with good intentions.

So elections were administered in an exemplary manner. All the international observation missions, and there were a lot of them, were very complimentary of how elections were conducted. However, the result was what we expected. The block vote system played its role, and Hamas, although never having more than 50% of the votes, never having a majority of the popular support, won an overwhelming majority of the seats in the Parliament. And that was a big

blow to what international communities saw as efforts to stabilize the situation, and a big blow to the roadmap for peace.

Unfortunately, the international community didn't even allow the newly formed Hamas government to prove whether they will be adhering to the commitments that Palestinians made vis-a-vis Israel and vis-a-vis peace process, and immediately imposed conditions on Hamas government that were simply unacceptable, that would require enormous U-turn in Hamas political platform, and at that moment, we're just not palpable.

So, the whole thing ended up in disaster. And when I say disaster, I mean by the Hamas government and Palestinian government being completely ostracized. Eventually, the situation led to the civil war in Palestine, where in Gaza, Fatah tried to take over, kicking Hamas them out of the government, and Hamas retaliated and took over Gaza. That happened in 2007, so just a year after elections. Since then, Gaza and the West Bank are effectively the two different territories, not just physically, but also politically, and in terms of governance, they're divided. Palestinians have been divided effectively for the past 20 years.

So, I think the interesting points from those elections are, number one, it was one of the very rare cases where we could see the block vote system in full effect. Until then, we didn't have many options to see the effects in practice of the block vote system. Besides Palestine, only Syria was using the block vote system, and we could see some effect of that in the Syrian elections in the past, but since in Syria, you never had proper competition and proper opposition, that was not very relevant. So Palestine was really a very interesting case study for election experts to see block vote in implementation of block vote system and the effect of it.

The number two is how the Palestinian elections were seen as a function of a peace process, rather than Palestinian internal competition, and when results were announced, results were seen as an element and aspect of the relationship between Palestinian Israelis, rather than Palestinian political competition. There was no violence in Palestinian elections. The Palestinian parties, including Hamas, all signed a code of conduct that they will be respecting the results, they will be respecting campaigning rules, and they will not be attacking each other, and they were adhering to that code of conduct. But this is not how the international community and Israel saw this election. They really saw those elections as part of the broader picture, how they do and how Palestinian leadership fits into the peace agreements, and not just internal political competition.

And the third thing, I think, it's the lesson learned is how the international community reacted in a knee-jerk way. Without waiting to see how the new government would be performing, the international community, very quickly put demands in front of the new government. and the new political establishment simply couldn't accept at that moment. And we didn't have the patience to wait a little bit longer and see what would be the political openings and ways to perhaps have some sort of dialogue with the new government. And in fact, we were even pushing the Palestinian Authority not to go into coalition or to reconcile with Hamas, and potentially build up some sort of coalition or technocratic government. We just wanted to get rid of Hamas, which while Hamas is labeled as a terrorist organization, we effectively ignored the fact that they still received significant

support from Palestinian voters.,I think it was a wasted opportunity for us not to stop and think a little bit about what does that mean. While that didn't mean necessarily that Palestinians were supporting the terrorist methods of Hamas, it meant that maybe they are supporting the anti-corruption message that Hamas was promoting, and that that was a clear signal how unhappy Palestinians are with the corrupt Palestinian Authority.

So I think those are sort of three big messages that are interesting to look at if somebody's interested, you know, 20 years later. The irony is that Palestinians never again had national elections. There were several rounds of negotiations to reconcile between Hamas and Fatah. They never did and never reached the point where they would have national elections again. In 2021, elections were scheduled, but then canceled for the same reasons that led to many problems in several rounds of local elections that happened in the past 20 years, and that is because of internal Fatah divisions.

The internal Fatah divisions and inability of Fatah to discipline itself, it's further creating a major problem. So we had an amazing transfer of power in 2005. Yasser Arafat died on November 11th. Temporary president, Rawhi Fattouh, immediately called for presidential elections. Elections were held on 25th of January, so essentially, within two months, Palestinians were able to launch presidential elections. And then, within a year, they had legislative elections. Both of those were deemed free and fair and complemented by the international community. Since then, they did not have national elections. And unfortunately, it appears that Palestinians will have to wait for some more time to go and vote for the President and the Parliament.

The situation right now is absolutely disastrous. There is no way to have Palestinian elections without Gaza. It is impossible to have elections in Gaza in this situation, and while on the other hand, we have huge issues with aging President Abbas, who's turning 90 years old, and very unclear succession plans. So it feels that all of the issues that are happening now politically in Palestine can be traced back to 2006, and those historical elections. Unfortunately, we are still looking at those as examples of great elections with a terrible outcome that Palestinians are still paying the price for.