Ammar Al-Dwaik
Palestine, 2005-2006
Transcript

Ammar Al-Dwaik: Hello. Hi, my name is Ammar Dwaik. I served back maybe 20 years ago from 2002 to 2006 in the Palestinian Elections Commission. Particularly from 2004 up to 2006, I was the CEO, the chief electoral officer of this elections commission. And during this short period, I managed the two historic Palestinian elections that continue to shape Palestinian politics until today. Now I will speak briefly about my experience and what are the lessons learned from this short but very intensive experience with the elections commission.

I remember when I was recruited to the Elections Commission in 2002, particularly December 2002, I was the first staff to be hired. The president appointed a nine-member commission. The chair and the secretary general of the commission contacted me and they offered me a job to work for the commission. And when I asked them “what is my role,” they said, "We don't know. Just come and work with us and you do whatever we do." So when we started the Elections Commission back in December 2002, we started literally from scratch.

There was no commission. The commission that managed the 1996 elections had been dissolved and disappeared. So we started from scratch. We had no organizational structure, no staff, no headquarters, no equipment, no prior experience in elections. None of the members, including myself as a staff working for the commission, had any prior electoral experience. So when we started in 2002, we had to start from nothing, but we were extremely lucky that we had a group of highly experienced and highly committed international electoral experts offering to assist the Elections Commission.

I worked closely with these experts. I learned practically every aspect of electoral administration working with them, how to design an organizational structure, staff recruitment, develop electoral procedures, establish voter registration systems, budgeting, planning logistics, voter education, and different countless operation details related to elections. And then we started voter registration also.

We established a voters roll from scratch, and this voters roll continues until today to be the base for electoral registration, and the Central Elections Commission continues to update it regularly. But the voter roll that was established in 2003 or 2004 is still the basis for the voter registry that is being used today by the Central Elections Commission in Palestine. The commission proved to be independent, and it was that an election commission cannot be independent simply because the law declares it independent.

And we saw how the Elections Commission, with its composition, and I should really give credit to Dr. Hanna Nasser, the first chair of the Central Election Commission in 2002, who continued to serve in this capacity until 2025. And also, I must give the biggest credit to Dr. Ali Jarbawi, the Secretary General of the Central Elections Commission, and also the CEO of the commission. And actually he's the one who recruited me to work for the Elections Commission.

Both Dr. Ali and Dr. Hanna are highly independent individuals, highly credible individuals, and they insisted on establishing a professional body, a body that recruits people solely on merits That does not take any other consideration in recruitment like political affiliation or others. So from the beginning, the commission insisted on establishing a highly qualified professional body that is based on merits.

And second, both Hanna Nasser and Ali Jarbawi, they welcomed international assistance to the Elections Commission, but they insisted on something that proved later to be very important and very strategic. They insisted that international experts who work for the commission shall not be involved in executive responsibilities. Their role is to provide advice to their Palestinian counterparts and to build the capacity of Palestinians so that Palestinians, at some point, would be able to run elections on their own.

And I think that proved to be really a very important lesson in building new institutions and building new electoral management bodies. And also to the credit of the international experts who worked with us, they really sincerely wanted to transfer their knowledge and expertise to their Palestinian counterparts. And I was lucky to be one of those counterparts and to receive all this knowledge and experience that was transferred to us by our international colleagues.

So, the commission for the first two years worked on putting a solid foundation for its establishment, created a voters registry that, as I mentioned, continues to be the basis for the voters roll until today, put an organizational structure, recruited highly competent staff, trained them, exposed them to the expertise of the international experts, and started to prepare for election operations.

So in October 2004, the then Secretary General and Executive Director, Mr. Ali Jarbawi, resigned for personal reasons, so I was appointed to replace him. I was still relatively young and had less than two years of experience in electoral administration. And actually, it was experienced basically in preparation for elections, but not in conducting elections. One month later, in November 2004, President Yasser Arafat passed away, which created a constitutional requirement to hold a presidential election within 60 days.

Suddenly, the institution we had been building was faced with its first major national test. We had approximately 60 days to organize an election for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority. The security environment was extremely fragile. The legal framework was complicated, and Israeli occupation and restriction on movement created enormous operational difficulties. So we had to prepare polling stations, recruit and train thousands of temporary electoral workers, distribute materials, organize voter education, coordinate with security institutions, and ensure that the process could take place in both the West Bank and in Gaza and in East Jerusalem at the same day.

There was also a particularly difficult question of voting in East Jerusalem, as it has its own unique procedures for voting based on the Oslo Accord between the PLO and Israel. And then

shortly before the election day, we faced another major complication. A decision was imposed, requiring the commission to use the civil registry in addition to voter registration that it had spent considerable time and resources in preparing.

And that was, you can imagine, an enormous logistical challenge. We had designed our system around a specific registration process, and all of a sudden, we had to accommodate an additional category of voters and revise procedures, train staff, and voter education, and logistics, and almost all plans to accommodate the new amendments to the law that imposed a new category of voter registration.

And that was only one month before elections. And I think that it gives a lesson in how sometimes political decisions even sometimes appear as, or presented as efforts to facilitate inclusion and participation can create serious risks for electoral administration when they are introduced at the last moment, and sometimes really might risk undermining the entire process. Nevertheless, we managed to organize the presidential elections in January 2005. For me, this was a tremendous professional achievement.

But the most important test was still to come. On the election day, we started to see some confusion among voters and candidates about the voters' registration and about the civil registry and the voters' roll. As the day progressed, the Central Electoral Commission came under intense political pressure to extend polling hours and change certain voting arrangements. The pressure was not simply a technical disagreement, but it was an attempt to favor certain type of voters to give them more time to vote.

It raised a much more fundamental question. Who had the authority to determine electoral procedures? The Independent Election Commission acting according to the law, or political actors concerned about the outcome of the turnout? Ultimately, unfortunately, the commission extended the voting hours, and succumbed to the pressure. And the decision to extend voting hours was announced around 2:00 p.m., six hours before the closing of the voting hours, which was really absurd.

Nevertheless, I can say that the immediate election results were not affected, like the election was in general free and fair. But, after the election, I, myself, faced a difficult personal and professional decision. I could remain in my position, avoid confrontation, and continue preparing for the next elections Or I could speak publicly about what had happened, knowing that doing so might put my career and my personal relations and my personal safety at risk.

I chose to speak. Together with some of my colleagues, I publicly disclosed that political pressure took place on election day, and this political pressure affected the decision of the commission to extend voting hours, and that political pressure was undue, was illegal, and sometimes there was intimidation and threats. So I believe that defending the institution sometimes requires challenging what has happened within it.

My resignation was intended to send a clear message. The independence of an election commission is not negotiable, and interference must carry a political and institutional cost. The reaction was significant. The issue received considerable attention in Palestinian and international media. It raised concerns among election observers, political actors, and international partners about the need to protect the commission.

And the controversy demonstrated that even when an election produces broadly acceptable results, violations of institutional independence should not be ignored. And it could happen, which was the case in Palestine. So this decision, and I believe, decision to resign and to announce the reasons for resignation, I believe it had a long-term effect. It drew the boundaries between the commission and the political actors, and it showed that the commission is serious about its independence and that it will not tolerate any kind of undue interference in its work.

And that paved the road for the 2006 elections that took place one year after that to be really free of any kind of pressure like what happened in 2005. That's why the 2006 elections appeared really, and in practice were free, fair, credible, clean. There were not really any problems or any kind of interference like what happened in the 2005 elections. So after the 2006 elections, I decided to leave the commission to pursue my doctoral studies.

I left with a strong sense of professional accomplishment, but also with understanding that institutions are always more important than the individuals who lead them. What mattered most to me was not whether I remained in charge. It was whether the institution could continue functioning professionally and independently after I left. Looking back over more than two decades, I believe that the Central Election Commission has retained important institutional strength despite the extraordinary political challenges facing Palestine.

I attribute much of that resilience to decisions taken during its formative years. From recruiting staff on merits, taking the right decision about the organizational structure, about the modality of how to deal with international experts, and also the decision to denounce and expose pressure on the commission that, in my opinion, draws permanent boundaries between political actors and the Election Commission.

But I want to say that the experience that I had with the Elections Commission taught me several lessons. I can summarize them as the following. One is that democratic institutions do not become independent simply because their founding laws say so. Independence is built through professional practice, credible leadership, and willingness to resist interference. The second lesson is that institutional culture begins with seemingly ordinary decisions.

Who gets recruited, how our procedures developed, and who has the authority to make decisions. These questions may appear administrative, but ultimately determine whether an institution can consolidate and build a solid foundation. The third lesson is that moments of institutional crisis can also become moments of institutional learning and consolidation. The political pressure that was experienced in 2005 exposed the vulnerability of a newly established institution to political pressure.

But our public response, myself and my colleagues, helped that vulnerability become visible and contributed to stronger expectations of independence. And I believe, until today, people still refer to that experience as a turning point in the history of the Elections Commission. The fourth lesson, and I think, unfortunately, I say that, is it also tells the limits of elections. The Palestinian experience shows that credible elections are necessary for democracy, but they are not sufficient.

Without respect for electoral outcome, without having a functioning representative institution like the parliament, independence of judiciary, rule of law, and political commitment to democratic accountability, even the best administered elections cannot guarantee democratic consolidation. And finally, I learned that the real measure of institutional building is not what an institution achieves under its founders, but whether it remains or whether it retains its professional character after they leave.

Thank you.

This transcript has been modified.