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Another round of Palestinian talks fail to deliver on unity

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Last week the interminable Palestinian national reconciliation negotiations failed yet again, amid mutual recriminations. Hamas complained that Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas was attempting to re-litigate already agreed-upon items. There was also apparently a dispute about the prospect of Mr Abbas serving simultaneously as both president and prime minister.

But the biggest obstacle was the question of new elections. Mr Abbas wanted a fixed date within three months. Hamas negotiators insisted on no date whatsoever. Hamas's position is "unity" must come first, and elections after. This means that the public would have very little input in determining legitimacy during the process of reunification between Hamas and Fatah, and would be consulted, if at all, only in an election long after the fact.

Hamas was also apparently the sole holdout against proportional representation. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Election Commission has been busily restructuring the voter registers in the West Bank, and also in Gaza, where 155,000 new voters have reportedly been added to the rolls.

Hamas, of course, was quick to point the finger squarely at Mr Abbas, but the Palestinian president was having none of it. On Wednesday he said elections would give the Palestinian public the "final word" on the nature of reunification. "However," he added, "our brothers in Hamas do not want us to carry out elections at this stage."

Mr Abbas has threatened to issue two presidential decrees: one announcing new elections

and the second announcing the formation of a new government to oversee those elections. But neither can actually be implemented without Hamas's acquiescence.

In spite of all this intense activity, there are few who believe that genuine Palestinian national unity is on the cards anytime soon. Elections are, to say the least, an extremely remote possibility, especially given Hamas's acceptance of them in theory but rejection of them in practice. Fatah, too, may not be quite as keen on balloting as it is able to appear by playing off of Hamas's total rejectionism on the question of voting.

For all of this frenetic bustle, there is very little, if any, movement towards actual unification or reconciliation. The situation on the ground remains completely unchanged, with Hamas firmly entrenched in power in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority somewhat beleaguered but still solidly ensconced in the Palestinian-ruled areas of the West Bank.

The national reconciliation kabuki show has now been going on for well over a year. It is a response to pressure from Arab states, and especially the Palestinian people themselves. Palestinians are well aware of the heavy price paid by this untenable national division.

The question that is starting to emerge now is, how many times can these parties bring the public to the brink of believing that unification is at hand with pompous pronouncements, only to snatch it away at the last second with bickering and turf-protection?

How long can this charade continue to function politically? How long will the Palestinian people sit by and watch with hope and anticipation these implausible efforts to fit the square peg of Hamas's attitudes and policies - intransigence towards Israel, commitment to armed struggle and religiously reactionary attitudes - into the round hole of the leadership in Ramallah which is secular, nationalistic and committed to a negotiated peace agreement with Israel? How can there be unity where there is no consensus on any major issue?

Palestinians seem to have little faith in any of their national leadership groups, and they came by it honestly. Hamas has been a disaster in Gaza, imposing quasi-theocratic and frequently misogynistic social policies, and engaging in reckless armed struggle with Israel at the expense of the lives of innocent people under their rule. The PLO appears to have largely run out of ideas other than symbolic efforts at the United Nations and other multilateral institutions that often carry more practical costs than benefits.

And in spite of the significant successes his institution-building policy enjoyed in the past, Prime Minister Salam Fayyad is now hamstrung by a fiscal crisis that is beyond his power to resolve.

The parties are due to meet again in Cairo on February 27, but few believe there is the basis or even the will to reach an actual reconciliation agreement. The danger is that what will ultimately emerge is a purely cosmetic "unity" government, largely composed of unaffiliated individuals, that will ostensibly prepare for elections which will never actually be held.

A false unity that involves elections that are always scheduled for tomorrow but never for today - and that allows the entrenched and separate security services to continue to dominate their own areas of control - is no solution. This would be a simulacrum of unity without its content, the mere packaging in which actual reconciliation might have come but never does.

At what point will the Palestinian public proactively and dynamically assert its own voice? Are elections, which Hamas seems determined to block, the only way for the public to express its

will? The Palestinian public for more than a year now has been demanding national unity. Clearly these two parties, left on their own, are not capable of achieving that, at least not in a constructive and purposive manner.

If Palestinians continue to leave matters to party operatives, who cannot agree on anything, all they can expect is either no unity at all, or a counterfeit unity even worse than debilitating division. There is a future beyond this impasse, but the Palestinian public must find its own alternatives.

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