



## **VIRTUAL PRE-ELECTION ANALYSIS TEAM STATEMENT REGARDING PALESTINIAN NATIONAL ELECTIONS ANTICIPATED IN 2021**

*March 22, 2021*

### **Introduction**

The National Democratic Institute (NDI or ‘the Institute’) assembled a virtual pre-election analysis team (V-PEAT) from March 2 to 17, 2021, to examine conditions for the upcoming legislative and presidential elections in the Palestinian Territories. The anticipated elections are scheduled, respectively, for May 22 and July 31, 2021. The purpose of the V-PEAT was to: demonstrate the interest of the international community in the development of stronger democratic political processes and governance in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (WBG); assess the prevailing political environment in the WBG and preparation for the anticipated 2021 elections; and identify areas where improvements may be needed to enhance the integrity and transparency of the electoral process. The international delegation included a panel of election and technical experts: Leslie Campbell, NDI Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regional director; Sarah Cooper, NDI Algeria country director and former NDI Global Elections program director; Arianit Shehu, NDI Jordan country director; and Toni Verstandig, NDI board member, former Deputy Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of State Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs and former director of Middle East Programs at the Aspen Institute.

The team conducted its virtual activities in accordance with the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*, which establishes the basis for credible international election observation and was formulated and endorsed by 55 intergovernmental and international organizations, including the United Nations Secretariat. In light of constraints imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which precluded deployment of additional international personnel to the WBG, NDI adapted its methodology to accommodate intensive remote engagement in addition to its activities on the ground. This analysis is based on in-depth virtual interviews conducted with political party representatives, officials from the Central Elections Commission (CEC), political analysts and academics, civil society leaders and activists; as well as the Institute’s expertise and relationships developed over 27 years of programming in the WBG. This program was made possible with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

All activities were conducted on a strictly nonpartisan basis and without interfering in the election process. The delegation offers this pre-election statement in the spirit of strengthening multi-partisan democratic institutions and effective election practices, and improving citizen engagement and accountability in the WBG. The delegation is deeply grateful to all those who

met with the delegation and generously shared their views. Ultimately, it will be up to the Palestinian people to determine the credibility of their elections and take advantage of any openings to engender meaningful political change. NDI stands ready to continue to assist Palestinian efforts to revitalize its democratic practices, institutions and civil society.

### *Summary*

On January 15, 2021, President Mahmoud Abbas released a presidential decree to announce the Palestinian Authority's (PA) legislative and presidential elections for this calendar year. The elections present an opportunity for Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip to exercise their democratic right to vote for the first time in over 15 years. As stipulated in the PA's Palestinian Basic Law, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) is an elected body of 132 representatives, which confirms the prime minister and cabinet upon nomination by the president. The rupture between Fatah and Hamas in 2007, which split authority over the West Bank and Gaza, suspended the PLC as an effective body; the Constitutional Court formally dissolved the PLC in 2019 under Abbas' directive. A revived PLC will be confronted with 14 years of executive actions to consider within the formal legislative process and little division of power between the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government. Therefore, the competitive environment for nominees and the outcome of the presidency will directly implicate the potential efficacy and political renewal brought in through a newly elected legislative council. The current schedule also includes elections for the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the parliamentary body of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), on August 31, though given the lack of precedent for these elections and the anticipated logistical and political obstacles, preparations are still nascent.

As Palestinians have been experiencing political dysfunction and deepened economic decline, the call for elections initially received widespread support and garnered extensive Palestinian media coverage. Inclusive, transparent and competitive elections would provide Palestinian youth in particular – who will constitute approximately 45 percent of total voters on the list – with an opportunity to exercise their political franchise and vote for leadership that should be responsive to priority issues, including unemployment and the socio-economic situation. However, given the backdrop of the COVID-19 environment, including lockdown restrictions and existing pressures on public institutions and services, the timeline of the elections and potential for meeting the conditions for openly competitive elections have been called into question. Concerns were expressed by several people with whom the delegation met over whether these elections would contribute to improved democratic institutions or simply “relegitimize” the power structures that have governed Palestinians for the last three decades. NDI's delegation recognizes and commends the efforts of the CEC to meet the election timeline imposed upon them, but further notes that additional time before elections could allow for more robust voter education as well as allow parties to dedicate additional time to candidate recruitment, list formation, and other activities that would measurably add to the competitiveness and fairness of the election process.

Since 2017, shifts in U.S. foreign policy and regional attitudes toward Israel, including the adoption of the “Abraham Accords”, prompted Palestinian political leaders to realign their priorities and move closer towards Fatah/Hamas reconciliation in order to present a united

Palestinian front. Through reconciliation talks, the governing parties agreed to hold elections in an effort to unify the governments of the West Bank and Gaza. Initial agreements included: the timing and sequencing of elections; accessibility of voting for East Jerusalem residents; support for the CEC; convening of an electoral court; issuing a decree to expand public speech; freeing political prisoners in both the West Bank and Gaza; and registering a body of domestic election monitors. Both Fatah and Hamas have much to gain from a successful election process, as elections could provide legal and international legitimacy to existing power structures, as well as a unified position from which to negotiate with Israel and the international community. Several of the political leaders interviewed by NDI's delegation mentioned national unity as the top priority for these elections. However, Hamas' participation in elections and possible participation in a post-election government remains a fraught subject for some Palestinians and for much of the international community. Hamas and Fatah recently agreed on a code of conduct for elections which includes an agreement to avoid election-based violence, but elections, at their core, are a renunciation of violence as a means to achieve political ends. The participation of individuals and groups in Palestinian elections who pursue violence and politics remains problematic.

Within a generally challenging environment, Palestinians face even more obstacles to successfully holding meaningful elections and reinvigorating national democratic processes. First, as pointed out by Palestinian civil society and international critics, the ongoing reconciliation talks draw into question the democratic nature of any elections that could take place at this time. Fatah and Hamas have agreed upon limitations to candidate registration and requirements for list formation in attempts to ensure a largely safe outcome for the existing political elite. Negotiations about the composition of party lists for the largest parties are expected to take place at the level of the party elite and largely behind closed doors. Some civic actors expressed concern that parties may use threats, slander or coercive tactics to deter candidates who challenge the idea of total faction discipline and unity from putting forth their nominations. Years of political repression and conflict between the dominant parties have undermined viable and genuine political opposition, closed much political space and left aspiring political contenders without resources, infrastructure and organized movements to mobilize support. Further, the breakdown of reconciliation talks and internal fracturing within Fatah have the potential to derail elections entirely if a mutually agreeable solution to achieve a unity government is not reached.

Second, the CEC and PA will require Israeli cooperation to proceed with election planning and administration, particularly on the issue of voting in East Jerusalem, though Israel has given little indication about its willingness to comply thus far. Israeli politicians are unlikely to exhibit support for the practicalities of holding Palestinian elections or a reconciled Palestinian leadership. Equally skeptical, many international critics and political analysts widely view the timing of Abbas' decree as a result of the election of U.S. President Joe Biden and an attempt to bring international attention back to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, rather than a genuine democratic process. Within this context, a range of interviews suggested that the Israeli position and likelihood for interference is currently unknown, though it will directly influence security and mobility for voters, campaigns and elections officials within and across the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem, as dictated by the presence of fixed and movable checkpoints which could also impede the free movement of politicians and activists.

Finally, existing restrictions within the COVID-19 environment could pose a challenge for the CEC and serve as justification for the PA to postpone or cancel elections. However, in interviews the CEC and party officials expressed full confidence in their ability to hold elections during the pandemic. As Palestinians entered their third wave of spiking infection rates, in March 2021 the West Bank declared a month-long state of emergency with governorates rolling in and out of short-term lockdowns. While these restrictions put further strain on an already struggling healthcare system and economy, the changing communications environment will also transform the potential for public engagement in politics, campaigning and the degree to which political parties and factions are held accountable to authentic policy platforms, issues that are already under strain given the accelerated elections timeline. The global pandemic further reduces the likelihood of an international observation mission, which a wide range of stakeholders have voiced preference for in order to uphold the transparency and perceived legitimacy of the elections process and results.

While some political commentators remain skeptical that any national elections will take place, particularly for the presidency, current steps towards elections may be significant for Palestinians in the long term. Elections and the resumption of democratic governance in the Palestinian Territories can contribute to a culture of meaningful civic participation and facilitate new avenues for citizen engagement on policy platforms, particularly among marginalized groups. In order for citizens to capitalize upon this opportunity and hold the PA accountable, they must first be faced with a real choice among political party lists and presidential nominees. An open and competitive environment for national elections is still highly vulnerable to the changing rules for candidacy, security environment and level of collusion among existing political parties, but will be essential for any national elections to usher in a new horizon for the internal reconciliation efforts, Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and improved social and economic conditions for Palestinians living in the WBG.

### *Electoral and Legal Framework*

Elections will be organized on the basis of the *2007 Decree Law Pertaining to the General Elections* and the *2021 Decree Law No (1) Amending the 2007 Decree Law*, as well as the Basic Law and any relevant presidential decrees or CEC protocols and bylaws on elections. While the electoral framework provides clear guidelines for the holding of elections and largely aligns with international norms, concerns have emerged regarding judicial independence and the ability of the courts to transparently and impartially adjudicate electoral claims and disputes.

In December 2020, President Abbas issued three decrees to amend judicial authority laws, following a decree on the dissolution of the High Judicial Council and its replacement by a Transitional Judicial Council in 2019. The members of this latter Council are presidential appointees who can be dismissed by executive order. Some interlocutors raised concerns that this process significantly eroded the separation of powers between the executive and judicial branches of government, granting the executive branch and those it appoints with wide-reaching powers to influence the future careers of lawyers and judges. Timing for these amendments, which were published in the official gazette just four days before the announcement of legislative and presidential elections, also suggested to some actors a desire on the part of the executive to influence electoral justice proceedings. Since the passage of these decrees, the Palestinian Bar

Association – representing some 15,000 lawyers – has staged protests in front of the courts in some cities in the West Bank and announced its intent to boycott participation in any amended judicial bodies, including courts of appeal, administrative courts and the Electoral Court. On January 16, 23 monitoring groups and civic associations issued a statement criticizing the decree laws and the timing of their issuance and calling for their repeal.

Should the Palestinian Bar Association boycott persist or should the Electoral Court fail to convene, this could effectively undermine the ability of the Electoral Court to fully adjudicate electoral complaints or disputes, which could cast serious doubts on the credibility of the electoral process. Moreover, the 2007 Decree Law established the Electoral Court as an innovation to the electoral process in Palestine and stipulated that it is to be composed of a president and eight judges who should be recommended by the High Judicial Council. In practice, the composition of the Electoral Court was negotiated during the February reconciliation talks in Cairo and then officially proposed by the Judicial Council. This may contribute to perceptions that the court's composition reflects the political interests of the major parties to the talks in Cairo rather than being truly independent.

### *Election Administration*

According to many people with whom the delegation met, and based on NDI's own observations over many years, the Central Elections Commission (CEC) is perceived as an effective and credible body with the technical competence to organize legislative and presidential elections in accordance with the timeline set out during the Cairo talks. Some public opinion polling, however, suggests that confidence in the CEC may have declined since 2006. The CEC is legally independent of the executive and legislative branches; its independent budget and overall professionalism also contribute to perceptions of impartiality and to public trust. Interlocutors cited some innate challenges with organizing elections under a bifurcated territorial authority, such as difficulties of establishing a clear chain of communication and response around security incidents on election day given that both Hamas and the PA operate police forces in Gaza, whereas the text of the agreement on elections in Cairo refers only to provision of election day security by 'Palestinian police.' These obstacles were not perceived to threaten the overall electoral timeline but have raised concerns and been the subject of continued discussions during reconciliation talks.

Although all parties agreed to a common Code of Conduct in March that aims to provide an environment in which all voters feel free to cast their ballots at the polls, election day security will need to be carefully managed to ensure this outcome. Fatah and Hamas have agreed to deploy police forces across polling stations on election day, but the longstanding institutional divisions between the West Bank and Gaza Strip leave room for potential security incidents, including intimidation of voters and candidates supporting different political parties. Political factions have raised concerns that the divided security apparatuses in the West Bank and Gaza respectively will be used to undermine components of the election, including applying political pressure, the loss of jobs and intimidation through family networks.

Legislative elections would take place under a system of closed list proportional representation with each list to be composed of 16 candidates. Presidential elections will take place in a single electoral district with a run-off to be held between the top two candidates if no candidate obtains an absolute majority of votes.

Interlocutors raised concerns that stringent requirements for ballot qualification may in practice inhibit political competition. Each legislative list must pay a \$10,000 deposit to the CEC, submit signatures from 3,000 voters supporting the list, and present an affidavit from each candidate on the list that he or she recognizes the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and will uphold the Declaration of Independence as well as the Basic Law. Presidential candidates must pay a \$3,000 deposit to the CEC and submit the same affidavit. Any candidate who does not already hold the office of presidency must also submit a list of 5,000 voters supporting his or her candidacy. Candidates for either election must resign prior to submitting their names for nomination if they are: authorities of the PA who are paid a monthly salary by the state; employees of public institutions or heads of local authorities; employees of international organizations; chairpersons, directors or employees of NGOs; judges; security; military personnel; police or governors. Should candidates fail to secure the seats for which they are contesting, they may reapply for a vacancy within the organization from which they resigned, but the position must be subject to an open competition.

This system could deter candidates from lesser known political parties or lists from standing for office, particularly in a lower position on a party list. Moreover, resignations from the civil service must be approved by Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh, potentially placing the PA in a gatekeeper role where resignations from the civil service could be selectively approved. The Chairman of the CEC has issued a statement asking President Abbas to put pressure on Prime Minister Shtayyeh to speed up the approval of resignations so that they may be finalized within the 12-day candidate registration period. Moreover, some interlocutors raised concerns that the large deposits required to stand for office could serve as an undue barrier to entry for newer candidates or party lists that wish to contest the elections – particularly for women and candidates from historically underrepresented groups who may have comparatively diminished access to resources.

Civic actors have demanded a repeal of candidacy restrictions, including a call to decrease the minimum age to run for office in the PLC to 23 years, to expand the quota for women on the electoral lists to 30 percent, to abrogate the requirement to resign before standing on a candidate list, and to eliminate restrictions around candidates standing for office if they have a previous record for felony or misdemeanor. Some interlocutors raised concerns with selective implementation of the provision that candidates must have no prior history of convictions, especially given clarifications from the CEC in March that candidates will not be required to submit a non-conviction certificate themselves but rather the CEC will verify candidate eligibility using an internal procedure. This raised questions for some actors around which data sources would be used by the CEC to undertake these verifications given the existence of parallel criminal justice systems in the West Bank and Gaza.

Although COVID-19 cases continue to rise throughout the WBG, the CEC has thus far demonstrated its ability to safely undertake critical steps in the electoral process while respecting health and safety measures. CEC officials are considered frontline workers and are receiving vaccinations, despite the delays in vaccine disbursement to other priority groups in the general public. On election day, the CEC is planning for in-person voting and for personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer to be made available to each eligible voter. Notably, however, COVID-19 conditions could deter the in-person deployment of international observation missions, which many interlocutors cited as critical to building public trust and confidence in the electoral process. Should civil society also play a diminished role in observing the elections to protest the new decree law on charitable associations (see *Civic Space, Citizen Engagement and Media*), this combination could create a concerning deficit of public oversight mechanisms and engender mistrust in the electoral process.

Several people with whom the delegation met pointed to the 93 percent registration rate achieved among eligible voters during voter registration in February 2021 as evidence of the successful adoption of new technologies and procedures to facilitate voting under pandemic conditions. Voters registered online, with each household having the ability to register up to five individuals using the same phone number. A mobile web application then allowed voters to verify details of their registration through short message service (SMS). In addition, the CEC established local committee centers in each governorate to manage enrollment. Several of the interlocutors with whom the delegation spoke raised concerns that they were aware of individuals whose names appeared on the voters list even though they did not personally intend to vote and speculated that information in the Civil Registry had been used as a basis for adding some voters. In other words, many people may have been added to the voters list simply based on their registration information contained in the Civil Registry, and not as a result of any active effort on their part to register. While the high registration rate achieved under pandemic conditions is commendable, it may overstate voters' willingness and intent to turn out to vote.

Of note, the voter registration systems experienced one breach of security on February 15 in Hebron, in which 320 voters, allegedly Hamas-supporters, had their designated voting center moved. The CEC identified the suspicious activity, immediately reversed the action, and filed a complaint to the prosecutor. The CEC then held a press conference to make a public announcement about the activity and the actions taken thereafter to ensure public confidence in the process. In future elections, the CEC may require a unique email address for each voter as a second point of validation to mitigate the potential for such breaches in the future. The CEC also noted the decision to develop this software internally rather than contracting with an external vendor as an added measure that gives confidence in the security and integrity of the list overall.

Voting in East Jerusalem is now, as in past elections, a salient issue that could affect the credibility of the electoral process. Historically, approximately 6,000 voters in East Jerusalem have been allowed to register and vote locally in post offices. Other citizens residing in East Jerusalem have been able to undergo a same day registration process in one of 15 other designated polling stations near their places of residence. These guidelines were agreed to in an annex of the Oslo Accords outlining the elections protocol; however, some individuals with whom the delegation spoke expressed doubts as to whether Israeli officials would allow the CEC to implement the protocol as per its stated guidelines.

## *Youth, Gender and Persons with Disabilities Inclusion*

The 2021 national elections present Palestinian political parties with an opportunity to engage a whole generation of new Palestinian voters. Up to 45 percent of current voter lists are made up of youth, between 18 and 32, who have not participated in previous national elections. Political parties and civil society widely recognize that youth will hold significant sway in the upcoming elections and they could channel their frustrations into electoral activity or descend into apathy, depending on how effectively the electoral process enables them to translate their votes into accountable governance and substantive youth-centered policy proposals. Despite such recognition, few politicians had a comprehensive plan for engaging youth as candidates or voters, citing either a lack of funding for such initiatives or an unclear path forward. The CEC has hosted limited virtual meetings with youth groups to encourage participation in elections, but widespread civic education or youth-targeted get out the vote campaigns were not cited.

Due to the absence of national-level political and administrative procedures in the WBG since 2007, progress towards the inclusion of women and youth as political representatives has remained stagnant in the last 15 years. In 2007, the registration age was decreased from 29 to 28 for PLC candidates, though civil society and youth activists continue to push for age requirements to be reduced to as low as 21; recent civil society demands have put forward age 23 as part of a unified platform.

CSOs are campaigning to increase the gender quota for national elections. The 2007 Election Law revised the gender quota for parliamentary elections, such that it currently requires candidate lists to include one woman in the first three names of a party list, which is followed by one woman per every four names throughout the remaining list. While these requirements ensure that approximately 26 percent of the nominated representatives are women, the national law differs from local election law and places no requirements on the election results. CSOs advocating for women's rights are demanding legislation to reform the gender quota to require that 30 percent of elected PLC representatives be women. Political party members have suggested that, while further revisions to the gender quota and age restrictions are unlikely at this time, they have made internal efforts to include closer to 30 percent women's representation on party lists.

Women's rights activists and CSOs stated that the gender quota does not translate into meaningful representation and participation for Palestinian women in politics. Overemphasis on the gender quota has allowed for the sidelining of policy platforms that deal with women-specific issues, family needs, youth and elderly support, and further fails to underscore the inherent value of gender equitable participation in politics. Given these dynamics, interviewees highlighted that prospective women candidates seeking to join party lists have to focus campaign efforts on targeting political party decision-makers rather than public engagement and policy priorities. Additionally, the PA and political parties have positioned the pending Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Optional Protocol ratification and Family Protection Law as socially divisive issues. As such, passing either law is unlikely to be included in major party platforms regardless of political leaning as candidates are afraid of losing votes.



The current political environment has enabled forms of gendered violence in politics, including instances of hate speech and intimidation targeting voters and potential candidates. Since 2019, fundamentalist groups have held intermittent protests against bills that aim to advance women's rights and outlaw domestic violence. These groups promote intolerant speech through public protests and online slogans that circulate in the elections environment through social media platforms such as WhatsApp. Additionally, interviewees provided anecdotal evidence that political parties leverage kinship networks to apply pressure on voters in gendered ways, in which family hierarchies have the effect of constraining the youth vote to support familial political affiliations. Persons with disabilities in particular are targeted with such tactics. Family pressure may have the effect of restricting new candidate participation, limiting platform formation, and reinforcing existing power dynamics. CSOs reported that intimidation tactics, in addition to candidate fees and signature requirements, may obstruct prospective women candidates from running at all or restrict their ability to promote their political agendas.

The CEC has taken measures to improve the accessibility of election and campaign materials as well as voting to persons with disabilities. Following consultations with CSOs and adopting international best practices, new measures include the provision of ballot materials in braille, ensuring wheelchair accessibility when possible, and training poll station staff to provide assistance to persons with disabilities. Voter registration did not include measures for the visually impaired to register without assistance and it was noted that braille is only read by a limited portion of the visually impaired population. CSOs have provided media outlets and campaigns with tips to make election and candidate information accessible to those with visual, audio and intellectual disabilities. While some political parties plan to include persons with disabilities as candidates, such names are anticipated to rank low on party lists; to avoid tokenism, disabled persons organizations plan to formulate and run their own list, organized on a platform that incorporates the National Strategic Framework for Disability that was adopted in 2012 but never implemented.

### *Civic Space, Citizen Engagement and Media*

Palestinian civil society will play a large role in mobilizing and educating the electorate, particularly given the high numbers of youth voters who will be voting in an election for the first time. Associations with whom the delegation spoke cited plans to monitor critical aspects of the electoral process, including proper application of election day proceedings in the polling centers as well as the adjudication of electoral complaints and disputes. Interlocutors referenced efforts already underway to coordinate information-sharing around the elections through loose forums for exchange facilitated by the Independent Commission for Human Rights. However, key civil society groups announced intent to boycott the upcoming electoral process – including all monitoring activities – following changes to the charitable associations law announced on March 2 through executive decree. Among other changes, the decree requires: charitable associations to receive prior approval from the PA for all programs and strategic plans; all activities be in line with government priorities; and caps on salaries and operational expenses. The law grants authority to the Ministry of Interior to shut down and liquidate organizations that are non-compliant, allowing assets to be seized by the government. In response to the planned boycott, the government on March 9 froze certain aspects of the NGO law pending further discussion, though at the time of writing civic associations insist on its full repeal. Should civil

society and the PA fail to reach accommodation on this issue, lack of civic engagement could be expected to have a direct negative effect on voter mobilization and education as well as on public confidence in the electoral process.

Given that health and safety restrictions related to COVID-19 are expected to limit candidates' ability to organize in-person events such as rallies or door-to-door campaigns, media outreach is likely to play an important role in transmitting candidates' policy platforms and visions to the public. Although the electoral law provides for each party to receive access to public media outlets on an equitable basis, airtime on private media is likely to be dominated by parties and candidates with the resources to pay. Candidates and lists that are less well-resourced but represent new and diverse voices may creatively use social media or other online engagements to share their messages, but will struggle to compete with more well-established parties on a truly level basis.

Political parties and civic actors with whom the delegation met expressed a clear need for the government to address critical issues including unemployment and opportunities for youth, the socio-economic situation and security. Nevertheless, interlocutors noted that few potential candidates or parties have articulated clear policy platforms that speak to these issues and that campaigning may instead take place on the basis of individual profiles and credentials.

## **Recommendations**

The delegation expresses the hope that, with appropriate conditions, these elections will mark a decisive move by Palestinian institutions to embrace good governance, accountability, democratic resilience and renewal for the sake of the Palestinian people and their future. In support of democratic principles and the possibility of successful, meaningful Palestinian elections, NDI offers the following recommendations:

### *Electoral and Legal Framework*

- In the post-election period, the President and PA should amend the current legal framework to address existing grievances of political contenders as well as civil society, in particular on the issue of candidates' eligibility, bringing the legislature up to international standards, and addressing existing contradictions for future electoral processes. Such a reform process should engage a diverse cross-section of communities and civil society in the WBG. The legal framework should be amended to guarantee proper representation by allocating seats for women and youth.
- The CEC in concert with the President, PA and political parties must ensure that there are clear procedures in place for independent, impartial and effective adjudication of electoral disputes, complaints and appeals, and that decisions can be rendered and enforced in a timely manner in accordance with the electoral law.

### *Election Administration*

- The CEC, PA and political parties must ensure unimpeded campaigning of every official candidate and list, and ensure a fair and free environment for candidates and lists to reach out to voters, free of any interference, threats and intimidation.

- Elections represent an important opportunity to give Palestinians – including significant numbers of young first-time voters – a voice in their government. If organized in an inclusive, transparent and competitive manner, they would also serve as a crucial step towards promoting accountable governance in WBG. The President, PA and CEC should evaluate whether the electoral calendar as announced in Cairo provides ample opportunity to carry out each step in the preparation of these elections so that the objectives of a truly democratic electoral process can be realized.
- Credible independent oversight of the electoral process is crucial to engender public confidence. The international community should provide robust financial and technical support to citizen observers and should ensure that international attention and solidarity for the electoral process is expressed whether through more traditional monitoring mechanisms contingent on health and safety conditions – or through other means.
- The CEC should make the voters list available in a complete, machine-readable format to facilitate an independent audit, thereby building confidence in the overall enrollment rate and the electoral process more broadly.
- Freedom of movement is the responsibility of both Palestinian and Israeli security forces. The international community should monitor and provide coordinated advocacy to ensure the safe passage and mobility of voters, CSOs, campaigns and election observers within and among the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
- Voting for the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, in keeping with provisions in the Oslo Accord and past practice, should be supported and facilitated by the Israeli government.

#### *Youth, Gender and Persons with Disabilities Inclusion*

- The President, CEC, PA, political parties, civil society and international community must actively support efforts to effectively combat violence against women in politics, and encourage women voters and women aspiring for an elected office. That should include establishing mechanisms to rapidly respond to reported instances of violence and to encourage party codes of conduct to provide a conducive environment for women's electoral participation. Consensus and legal requirements concerning the gender quota also need to be developed.
- Young voters can play a critical role in the upcoming election process if they are able to exercise an informed choice between clear policy platforms. Political parties, lists and candidates should formulate clear platforms and policies to address current youth grievances and build citizens' trust and confidence, particularly among youth, in upcoming electoral processes and future elected institutions. To that end, candidates and lists should reinforce strategic communications including use of online media to ensure robust outreach and messaging targeted to youth voters.
- The CEC, PA and political parties should continue to effectively engage disabled persons organizations to improve accessibility for participation in elections, including revising voter registration online formatting to allow for embedded audio assistance. Any future awareness and education videos and materials should portray and include people with disabilities. In addition, the relevant authorities should ensure that people with disabilities are afforded equal access to the electoral process as voters or candidates.
- Political parties should make efforts to more meaningfully promote ongoing party renewal and nurture leadership opportunities for young Palestinians – as candidates, in

campaigning and in other party operations – to demonstrate greater responsiveness and build the next generation of leadership that can continue appropriate reform efforts.

*Civic Space, Citizen Engagement and Media*

- The President and PA should reach accommodation with civil society on grievances related to the 2021 Charitable Associations Amendment and ensure that civil society is empowered to monitor the upcoming electoral process. The CEC, PA, political parties and civil society, with the assistance of international donors, should sponsor comprehensive voter education and awareness campaigns to ensure voter participation and trust in the electoral process.
- Regardless of the timeline for elections, the international community and Palestinian institutions should provide ongoing financial and technical support to: train domestic elections monitors to build a comprehensive capacity of civil society to monitor all stages of the electoral processes and provide their input and reports on the regularity and fairness of the electoral processes; facilitate civic education; provide capacity building for candidates, particularly youth, women and marginalized populations; help CSOs monitor hate speech and fake news; and improve skill sets for CSOs and activists to effectively organize online.
- The PA, political parties and civil society should protect freedom of expression while addressing issues of misinformation and hate speech.