



By: TA | AP Brief

Local elections in the West Bank and part of Gaza could test public trust



For the first time in two decades, Palestinians in battle-scarred Gaza are voting in local elections Saturday.

And in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, voters are casting ballots for the first time since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

Turnout may reflect the level of public trust in a broader system led by aging leaders in the West Bank and as Gaza prepares for an anticipated transition from Hamas rule.

The vote in the West Bank will determine the makeup of the local councils overseeing water, roads and electricity.

The vote in a single city in Gaza, on the other hand, is largely symbolic, with officials calling it a "pilot."

Though it has not held presidential or legislative elections since 2006, the Palestinian Authority has promoted the local races following reforms it enacted last year after **demands from international backers**.

Under the slogan "We Stay," the Ramallah-based Central Election Commission has campaigned to encourage participation among the nearly 70,000 voters eligible in Gaza's Deir al-Balah and 1 million in the West Bank.

Voting "reflects the will if the Palestinian people to stay on their land and develop their country," its spokesperson Fareed Taamallah said.

Polls opened early Saturday morning with a steady stream of voters in the West Bank.

In the village of Deir Ibzi, near Ramallah, some parents brought their children to watch as election workers helped voters locate their names and voter IDs.

While voting, each voter dips their finger in blue ink to show they have voted and avoid fraud.

Linking the West Bank and Gaza

politically

With much of Gaza decimated by more than two years of war, the commission chose to hold its first vote in Deir al-Balah, which has been damaged by airstrikes but was one of the few areas spared an Israeli ground invasion.

It had to improvise because it was unable to conduct traditional voter registration.

The main idea is to link the West Bank and Gaza politically as one system - Fareed Taamallah

"The main idea is to link the West Bank and Gaza politically as one system," Taamallah said. Palestinians see uniting the two under one government as integral to any path to future statehood.

The commission has not coordinated directly with either Israel or Hamas ahead of the Deir al-Balah vote and has not been able to send materials like ballot paper, ballot boxes or ink into Gaza, he added. COGAT, the Israeli military body that oversees humanitarian affairs in Gaza, did not respond to questions about whether it would allow election materials in.

Though Palestinian voter turnout has gradually decreased, it has been relatively high in **past local elections** by regional standards, according to commission figures, averaging between 50% and 60%.

By comparison, turnout in recent local elections in **Lebanon** and Tunisia was under 40% and 12%, respectively.