

# Acclamation Expands, Participation Recedes: A Stress Test for Local Democracy

Iyad Al-Riyahi and Ashraf Samara  
Social and Economic Policies Monitor  
(Al-Marsad)

The Social and Economic Policies Monitor (Al-Marsad) publishes this brief as a preliminary reading of the key indicators shaping the 2026 local authority elections, ahead of a fuller analysis of the process.

The preliminary figures do not suggest an expansion of local democratic participation. They point, rather, to a more troubling contraction. In several major cities, meaningful competition has receded, as boycott, weak candidate nomination, and low voter turnout converge to distance significant segments of the electorate from the ballot box before the vote can function as a genuinely competitive democratic exercise.

## I. Beyond the Official Turnout Rate: Only 35 Percent of the Electorate Cast Ballots

Across the West Bank, 1,491,337 people were eligible to vote in 419 local authorities. Yet for a substantial share of this electorate, the possibility of competitive participation had already been foreclosed before polling day. In localities where lists won by acclamation, 465,266 voters had no ballot to cast. Another 56,425 lived in localities where no lists were nominated, while the process was postponed for 10,515 more. Even where competition formally remained, 437,101 eligible voters did not go to the polls. Put differently, 969,307 eligible voters—roughly 65 percent of the electoral base—did not participate in the process. Only 522,000 votes were cast<sup>1</sup>, representing about 35 percent of the broader electorate<sup>2</sup>. The result was not simply low turnout, but a narrowing of the democratic field itself: competition disappeared across a large number of local authorities, while abstention deepened even where elections were actually held.

The Central Elections Commission's announced turnout rate of 56 percent is methodologically valid within the formula it uses to calculate participation. Yet that figure measures participation only within the narrower field where voting took place. It does not capture the more consequential democratic question: How much of the eligible electorate was able, or willing, to participate in a meaningful competitive process?

## II. De Facto Exclusion: New Challenges in Major Cities

In major centers, the contraction of electoral choice was especially stark. An estimated 139,876 eligible voters were left without a meaningful opportunity to participate and remained outside the electoral process on polling day—an unprecedented development in the history of Palestinian local authority elections.

- **Nablus: 88,500** eligible voters were affected by acclamation.
- **Ramallah: 23,244** eligible voters were affected by acclamation.
- **Qalqilya: 28,132** eligible voters were affected by the absence of nominated candidate lists; under the amended electoral system, the case is referred to the Ministry of Local Government.<sup>3</sup>

## III. Low Turnout Across Municipalities and Local Councils

The data trace a clear gradient in participation: markedly low turnout in major municipalities, followed in some smaller localities by what approaches electoral collapse. This pattern raises fundamental questions about what these elections can mean, and what representative capacity they can claim.

In Al-Bireh, turnout stood at 24 percent: 5,141 voters out of an eligible electorate of 21,318. The result points to a sustained pattern of abstention, with participation falling by 6 percentage points from the previous cycle.

1 Central Elections Commission, (2026). Statement by the Chairman of the Central Elections Commission announcing the results of the 2026 local elections, Ramallah, Palestine. <https://www.elections.ps/Default.aspx?TabId=1069&ArtMID=8994&ArticleID=5306>

2 Central Elections Commission, (2026). Facts and Figures, Ramallah – Palestine. <https://www.elections.ps/tabid/1295/language/ar-PS/Default.aspx>

3 Central Elections Commission—Palestine, “The Electoral System for Local Elections,” accessed April 28, 2026, <https://www.elections.ps/tabid/318/language/en-US/Default.aspx>.

In Hebron, turnout did not exceed 36 percent. Only 35,192 of 107,820 eligible voters cast ballots, an 8-percentage-point drop from the previous elections.

In Deir Al-Balah, turnout reached 22.83 percent, with 15,962 voters casting ballots out of 70,449 eligible voters. The gap between expectations of broad participation and the actual result is especially revealing. A large electoral base, and even a political decision to participate, do not by themselves generate turnout where genuine competition is absent, the amended legal framework narrows the field, and the severe pressures shaping life in the Gaza Strip weigh heavily on public life.

Cases such as Kafr Qallil, where only two of 2,500 eligible voters cast ballots, and Hebron–Al-Rihiya, where only 20 of 2,990 did so, point to something beyond abstention. They suggest a near-complete hollowing out of the electoral process. This near-collapse appears to have been shaped by undeclared local understandings. In a number of local authorities, families, political forces, or both appear to have agreed in advance to avoid an actual vote and settle instead on a consensual council formation. Such arrangements reflect a form of local social arrangement—an effort to contain internal conflict, especially among families, by moving competition outside the ballot box.

### When Choice Matters: Electoral Competition and Voter Turnout in Local Elections

Local authority election results point to a positive correlation between competition and participation. Where three or more lists competed, municipalities recorded higher turnout. In several cases, turnout exceeded 80 percent, including in Dar Salah, Beit Kahil, Sarra, and Habla, where four or more lists ran. It also exceeded 70 percent in Ajja, Deir Istiya, Kafr Dan, Baqa Al-Sharqiya, Deir Al-Ghusun, Ya'bad, Deir Samit, Bal'a, Haris, Kifl Hares, Bidya, and Aqqaba.

By contrast, turnout was lower in municipalities where competition was limited to two lists, including Hebron at 33 percent and Jenin at 39 percent, as well as Qatanna, Al-Bireh, and others. The pattern underscores a basic democratic condition: participation is strengthened when electoral choice is real rather than merely procedural.

The same dynamic appears in village councils, where turnout rises as the number of candidates increases. It is more visible in municipalities, however, even though competitive village councils generally record higher turnout and show less variation than municipalities.

#### IV. More Lists Returned by Acclamation

The amendments to the election law, together with a broader climate of voter disengagement, contributed to the growing use of acclamation. This, in turn, narrowed electoral competition and further undermined the public incentives to participate. The number of lists returned by acclamation rose from 185<sup>4\*</sup> in the previous elections to 197 in this cycle, covering 42 municipal councils and 155 local councils.

The picture, however, is not entirely linear. This cycle also saw a modest improvement in candidate nomination: The number of local authorities where no lists were nominated fell by nearly half, from sixty in the previous elections to forty this time.<sup>5\*</sup> This improvement is not insignificant, but neither does it alter the larger pattern. Competition remained weak in many localities, and the comparison should be read in light of the supplementary local elections held for some local authorities in the previous cycle.

4 \* This figure combines local authorities returned by acclamation in the 2021 local elections and the 2022 supplementary local elections.

5 \* This figure refers to local authorities for which no lists were nominated in the 2021 cycle. Some later submitted lists in the supplementary elections, so the combined 2021–22 figure is lower.

## V. Key Electoral Process Challenges

First, the elections unfolded under the continuing weight of occupation and the repeated exposure of West Bank cities, towns, and villages to military and settler violence. This reality has deepened public doubt, particularly over whether local elections can produce any tangible improvement in political or economic life. Against this backdrop, attempts by some political actors to present the elections as an opening for change proved unconvincing.

Second, the 2026 local election cycle was governed by the amended election law issued on November 19, 2025. The amendments generated broad controversy, especially the decree-law provisions setting out candidacy requirements. Chief among them was the requirement to adhere to the political program of the Palestine Liberation Organization. This requirement appears to have narrowed the field of political competition and weakened participation opportunities for parties and political forces across the political spectrum.