

Palestinian leader Abbas to call for elections

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Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas said Tuesday that he will call later this week for elections to be held on January 24, 2010, a move apparently designed to pressure Hamas into signing a unity deal mediated by Egypt.

"I will issue a presidential decree after several days, on October 25, designating January 24 as the date of the elections," Egypt's state-run news agency MENA quoted Abbas as saying. Abbas was in Cairo for talks with President Hosni Mubarak.

If Hamas signs the unity deal after the October 25 decree, Abbas said, "we will issue another decree to conduct the elections on June 28", the date proposed by the Egyptian deal.

The elections would normally be scheduled for January 25. The polls, for both the parliament and the presidency, would take place in the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas would probably be able to prevent them from going forward without an agreement.

Abbas said his Fatah party accepts the Egyptian deal and blamed Hamas for scuttling the chances for an agreement.

"Fatah completely supported the Egyptian proposal... but then Hamas put down obstacles to achieving a reconciliation," Abbas told reporters after meeting with Mubarak.

Egypt has been working for months to broker a reconciliation deal between the two main Palestinian factions.

Fatah signed a draft accord but Hamas has repeatedly postponed its official response, saying it needs more time to consider the deal. Hamas has said it was concerned over inconsistencies between the final Egyptian version of the agreement and what the Palestinian factions had agreed on in talks in Cairo over the past year.

Egypt has indicated that it is losing patience with the Islamist Hamas and said the final draft was not up for negotiation.

