The Palestinian Hamas movement, which governs the besieged Gaza Strip, has slammed President Mahmoud Abbas’s decision to delay parliamentary polls that were scheduled to take place on May 22.

Late on Thursday, President Abbas announced the postponement, citing Israel’s rejection of allowing elections to be held in occupied East Jerusalem. He stressed, however, that once Israel permits elections in Jerusalem, he will hold the polls “within a week”.

“We received with regret the Fatah [group] and Palestinian Authority’s decision represented through its chairman, Mr Mahmoud Abbas, to disrupt the Palestinian elections,” the Hamas group said in a statement.

It said it held the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Fatah fully responsible for the postponement and its repercussions, considering such a step “a coup against the path of national partnership and consensus”.

The statement said Hamas had boycotted the meeting, as “it knew earlier that the PA and Fatah are heading to disrupt the elections for other calculations not related to Jerusalem”.

Also rejecting the decision, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine called for adherence to national agreements to hold the elections, adding that it will seek all means to reverse the decision to postpone the vote.

The European Union foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, also condemned the decision to delay the long-awaited polls.

“The decision to postpone the planned Palestinian elections, including the legislative elections originally scheduled for 22 May, is deeply disappointing,” Borrell said in a statement.

“We strongly encourage all Palestinian actors to resume efforts to build on the successful talks between the factions over recent months. A new date for elections should be set without delay.”

The delay risks inflaming tensions in a politically fractured Palestinian society.

Earlier this week, Al-Quds daily, known for being close to the PA, revealed that Abbas was under Arab and American pressure to delay the polls. It said the pressure was due to the likelihood of Hamas winning the elections.

Protests

Speaking to our reporters before the decision, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank said if the Palestinian government really wanted to hold a vote, it would have found a solution.

“It’s easy to find excuses,” a Palestinian shopkeeper said.

Following Abbas’s decision, hundreds of angry Palestinians gathered in the central city of Ramallah and the Gaza Strip to condemn the move.

“We have an entire generation of young people that doesn’t know what elections mean,” Tariq Khudairi, a protester in Ramallah, told AFP news agency. “This generation has the right to elect its leaders.”

Abbas’s critics had charged that he would use the Jerusalem issue to buy time as Fatah’s political prospects deteriorated.

Observers also see the Jerusalem issue as a possible pretext for the cancellation because a victory for Abbas’s heavily divided Fatah is considered uncertain.

In recent polls, two-thirds of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the president.

Abbas has also faced challenges from Fatah splinter groups, including one led by Nasser al-Kidwa, a nephew of iconic Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, and another by a powerful, Fatah security chief, Mohammed Dahlan.

‘Nonsense’

During the last Palestinian election, East Jerusalem residents cast ballots on the outskirts of the city and thousands voted in post offices, a symbolic move agreed to by Israel.

Israel’s foreign ministry said this week that elections were “an internal Palestinian issue, and that Israel has no intention of intervening in them or preventing them”.

But it made no comment on voting in Jerusalem, the city it describes as its “undivided capital” and where it now bans all Palestinian political activity.

Abbas told PLO leaders that he had received a message from Israel saying it could not offer guidance on the Jerusalem issue because the Jewish state currently had no government.

Israel is itself mired in its worst-ever political crisis, with no government yet formed following the inconclusive March 23 elections.

Speaking to reporters before Friday’s announcement, Palestinian journalist and Abbas critic Nadia Harhash said using Jerusalem to justify a postponement “is definitely not a smart move for the PA”.

Harhash, an election candidate in an anti-Abbas faction, argued it gives Israel de facto veto power over the Palestinian right to vote.