

Hamas Wins the Palestinian Elections

By Phyllis Bennis | January 27, 2006

The Palestinian elections, while conducted under military occupation, were different than those in Iraq. The process was created and implemented overwhelmingly by Palestinians themselves, voter turn-out was high, and appears more or less free of intimidation. The most significant impediment was Israel's refusal to allow campaigning of Hamas and other parties in occupied East Jerusalem, and its severe limits on who could vote within the city. But there is no indication yet that those problems had a significant impact on the result.

The appeal of Hamas stems from an urgent Palestinian demand for change in leadership, both generational and political, opposition to corruption, and dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of capacity of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to provide for the basic needs of its people. Public dissatisfaction with the PA, in which Hamas played no role (though it did participate in municipal elections and controlled some local governments), appears to have been the decisive factor in this parliamentary election, with people voting against the status quo and for change. Progressive and secular parties might have won significant sectors of the anti-Fatah vote if they had united in a single electoral list, but disagreements led to five separate blocs, none of which won more than two or three seats.

Inside the occupied territories, despite the hard-line rhetoric of its official Charter and some unease from secular Palestinians, Hamas is viewed much more through the prism of non-corruption and social welfare, than that of its long-standing militancy against Israel. Even before it ever participated in the Oslo-created municipal governments, Hamas ran networks of schools and clinics, repaired sewage and water facilities, provided food and financial assistance to families of Palestinians

imprisoned or killed by Israeli forces (including but not limited to suicide bombers), and more. In that role, as well as in their more recent incarnation as participants and even leaders in municipal governments, Hamas officials practiced a kind of pragmatism that included quiet dealings with Israeli counterparts. Hamas has largely maintained a ceasefire with Israel for the last year.

The election of Hamas does not mean that “all hopes for peace have been dashed.” There were no Israeli-Palestinian negotiations underway, and therefore no viable hopes for peace on the table even before the election.

1. The Elections

- The Palestinian elections, held under conditions of military occupation, are a flawed exercise in democracy. However, it is likely the results represent a reasonably accurate assessment of public opinion. Someone better tell President George W. Bush to be careful what he calls for, because this is what democracy looks like.
- All indications are that the huge turnout for Hamas was less a statement of support for its Islamist social agenda than it was a call for



change in the Palestinians' untenable situation—it was a vote against, not a vote for.

2. What's Next for Palestine

- Hamas' large majority does not mean that it wants to or will control the Palestinian Authority government on its own. There are numerous coalition options that could involve independents and even Fatah figures in key positions.
- The election of Hamas, its inexperience and uncertain ability to engage in serious diplomacy either with Israel or with other international players, may lead to a renewed role for the Palestine Liberation Organization, largely marginalized diplomatically since the creation of the Palestinian Authority in the mid-1990s.
- The symbolism of Hamas in control of the Palestinian Authority legislative assembly is potent, but the territories remain under Israeli military occupation, and the power of the "Authority," especially the Assembly, is sorely limited.
- Even before the election, Hamas spokespeople had indicated that they had their eye on domestic issues—that they were not interested in controlling key ministries like defense or foreign affairs, but rather were looking at social welfare, education, and related issues. While secular Palestinians may still shudder at some of those possibilities, it was widely viewed as evidence that Hamas was not prepared to contend with Fatah for actual national governing power, and especially did not want to take on international affairs.
- It is likely, whether or not Fatah maintains its current stance of refusing to join a Hamas-led coalition, that Hamas will choose mostly technocrats as ministers, and will select an independent, non-Fatah but non-Hamas figure for

prime minister. Speculation often centers on Salam Fayyad, a former World Bank official, who ran as an independent on a small slate joined by well-known Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi.

- Palestinian Authority President Abbas is also titular head of the PLO, so involving him in that position could lead to much broader Palestinian representation. In one of his post-election speeches, Abbas actually indicated that the PLO (which does not include Hamas) would be responsible for negotiating with Israel.
- Unlike the PA, which has authority only over Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (Israel even denies its authority over East Jerusalem Palestinians), the secular PLO is seen as representing all Palestinians—those living under occupation, those inside Israel, and those who are refugees and exiles around the world. Long recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, involving the PLO as a key player again might just make real a new possibility of ending the Israeli occupation and implementing Palestinian rights based on international law, UN resolutions and human rights, thus setting the stage for a just peace and an end to violence.

3. Israel's Response

- The Hamas victory in the PA's parliamentary elections may in fact make it easier for the Israeli government to justify acting unilaterally. The claim that "we have no partner for peace" will sound more credible now, despite the fact that the exact same claim has been made since the end of 2001 when Fatah's dominance was unquestioned.
- Israeli leaders' statements that they will not negotiate with a Hamas-led government are a red herring. Israel has not been negotiating with

the existing (non-Hamas) Palestinian Authority anyway, choosing instead a strategy of unilateral action to redraw borders and impose a “solution” to the conflict. That dangerous strategy may become even easier with Hamas in leadership.

- Most of the problems plaguing Palestinian life in the occupied territories—deteriorating social and economic conditions, unemployment at 70% in some sectors, and crucially, the relentless constraints of checkpoints and other closures—are caused by Israel’s military occupation, over which the ostensible “Authority” has no control. As long as the military occupation remains in place, the Palestinian Authority will remain largely impotent—with or without Hamas—to answer those needs.
- Sharon’s unilateral moves—“disengagement” from the Gaza Strip, building the separation Wall, and preparing for annexation of huge swathes of Palestinian land—were all aimed at consolidating an expanded Israeli state including all major West Bank settlement blocs and walling off Palestinians into a set of non-contiguous bantustan-like cantons. Those efforts, based on excluding the Palestinians and negotiating only with Washington, remain unchanged since Sharon’s incapacitating stroke.
- It should not be forgotten that Israel funded and supported the emergence of Hamas in Gaza during the first intifada, or uprising, hoping it would successfully challenge the secular nationalism of the PLO.

4. The United States

- There is a danger that U.S. efforts to isolate Hamas could significantly worsen conditions in the occupied territories, in Israel and in the region.

- The U.S. has accepted the unilateral, no-negotiations approach of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, including Israel’s abandonment of the U.S.-backed “road map.” But an even more antagonistic U.S. position towards the Palestinians, in the context of Hamas leadership, could make conditions inside the territories, and thus the potential for greater violence, far worse than they already are.
- U.S. responses to the Palestinian election results demonstrate again the hypocrisy of Washington’s claims of supporting “democratization” in the Middle East. While President George W. Bush was careful to acknowledge the high turn-out and lively discussion that characterized the elections, he repeated that Washington would not deal with Hamas unless it explicitly rejected its call to destroy Israel.
- The administration demands and praises multi-party elections, but refuses to deal with a government if voters choose a party not to Washington’s liking.
- The White House spent more than \$2 million in the last days of the campaign on small-scale sports, water, school-building and other projects to be credited to PA President and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas, designed to bolster Fatah in the election.
- There is also a particular hypocrisy in the Bush administration’s claims about the incompatibility of parliamentary participation and armed militias. What else does George Bush think best characterizes the Shia and Kurdish parties that control his most-favored government in Iraq?
- Reminiscent of the U.S. position in 1988 with Yasser Arafat, Washington is again demanding specific language from a key Palestinian political movement. Then it was necessary for the PLO

to say the words “we reject terrorism.” Now Hamas must “recognize Israel’s right to exist.”

- During the last two years, even while supporting Israel’s unilateral rejection of negotiations with the Palestinians, the U.S. kept its own ties with the PA. If those ties are ended, and especially if Washington cuts its already minimal economic aid and/or urges other international actors to do the same, the results could be dire.
- Bush’s own statements seem to indicate that the U.S., despite opposition to Hamas, is looking for ways to maintain ties with Palestinian officials (certainly including continuing President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah). One possibility could lead to a renewed role for the Palestine Liberation Organization, which has been largely side-lined since the Palestinian Authority was created in 1994.

5. Other Key Players

- Already reflecting the Bush focus on Hamas’ language, the long-dormant Middle East “Quartet” (the diplomatic fiction made up of the U.S.,

Europe, Russia and the UN) issued a statement calling on Hamas to renounce violence and accept Israel’s right to exist.

- Israeli Foreign Minister Tsipi Livni (who, as justice minister, identified the route of the separation wall as the future border of Israel) called on the EU—including some of the biggest financial donors to the PA—to oppose the creation of a “terrorist government.”

Phyllis Bennis is a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. and a Foreign Policy In Focus scholar.

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