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HAMAS' VICTORY IN THE PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

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To the surprise of most observers, Hamas has won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections by a large majority. For the first time in almost forty years, leadership has passed, through democratic means, from those who created the national movement and have dominated it ever since, and the Palestinian political system is now entering a period of profound uncertainty.

Fatah's defeat is grounded in several factors, particularly its political failures and its shortcomings as a governing party responsible for public welfare. Widespread anarchy during the years of the *intifada* undermined the foundations of society and the legitimacy of the national struggle and prompted the younger-generation leadership in Fatah to demand from Yasir Arafat and his contemporaries a program of reforms that could create the foundations of an effective non-violent civil struggle to underpin the political struggle with Israel. They also demanded a profound change in governance that could produce a democratic "state of institutions" and rehabilitate Fatah as the leading national movement and credible governing party worthy of public support. These demands, however, were not met, largely because Arafat blocked every attempt to constrain his own authority. The younger generation of Fatah leadership saw in Arafat's departure from the scene and the more pragmatic approach of his successor a

golden opportunity to assert itself more effectively and put Fatah's house in order. But Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) quickly proved impotent in the face of the old guards' resistance to any organizational reform that would jeopardize their standing. And in the months preceding the elections, when Abu Mazen tried – under pressure from his contemporaries – to entrench discredited old figures in Fatah's list, the younger generation, led by Marwan Barghouti in the West Bank and Muhammad Dahlan in Gaza, cooperated with each other in an effort to impose change, even to the point of provoking a crisis by setting up a separate list (*al-Mustaqbal*).

Meanwhile, Hamas was able to capitalize on the social-religious infrastructure and military force it had built up during the *intifada*. Its immediate objectives were to persist in its campaign of violence in order to preclude any possibility of reviving the political process with Israel and to strengthen its standing as a legitimate political actor in anticipation of "the day after," i.e., after Arafat's departure from the scene, so that any future regime could not function without Hamas support. However, Hamas was forced to reexamine its policy in light of the new reality created by Arafat's death and Abu Mazen's more pragmatic approach. The movement's leadership was fully attuned to the public mood, which



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increasingly preferred an end to the military confrontation, and it was forced to compromise its basic principles in order to preserve its improved public standing and translate that into political power. These considerations provided the background for the decision to enter the arena of institutional politics, in the expectation that gains in municipal elections and an impressive showing in the PLC elections would confer important benefits: influence on legislation, oversight of government, and jobs and budgets.

But developments in the last year, especially an unexpected degree of success in municipal elections, produced a shift in rhetoric and image, based on the belief that Hamas actually had a chance of winning the PLC elections and taking over leadership of the PA and the Palestinian people. In contrast to Fatah, Hamas managed a smooth transition from older leadership (many of whom were killed or arrested by Israel) to younger successors. Coupled with the incorporation into the list of senior personalities who still carry moral authority, this process allowed Hamas to project an image of responsibility, sobriety and pragmatism that helped insure its victory.

Hamas is a relatively young political force that has dominated the Islamist camp since its establishment in 1988. But notwithstanding its sweeping victory, its fundamental principles, articulated in its Covenant and its election platform, complicate its chances of forming a government and managing by itself the domestic and foreign affairs of the Palestinians. Part of the challenge arises from the fact that the Abu Mazen comes from the ranks of Fatah and was himself elected President of the PA less than a year ago on the basis of a much more pragmatic platform. A Legislative Council dominated by Hamas and presumably guided by entirely different principles appears to be a recipe for constant wrangling, if not complete paralysis.

As a result, the Hamas leadership – fully aware

of the national burden it will now assume – is already trying to convey to Fatah and other, smaller factions a sense of “national destiny” and a desire to form a broad coalition to ensure the stability of the PA. It has offered Fatah a partnership in government and suggested that its main priorities will be social and economic reconstruction. It has also indicated that it is prepared to maintain the *tahdia* (relaxation of tensions) provided that Israel reciprocates and has declared its intention to coordinate with other factions regarding the character of “resistance” to the occupation, which it insists is a legitimate right. At the level of national politics, Hamas apparently intends to establish a “new PLO” with different representation in the national institutions (Palestinian National Council, Central Committee and Executive Committee). Hamas’ purpose is to initiate a new debate about the “Palestinian national principles,” different from those elaborated by the PLO in 1988 and more acceptable across the Palestinian political spectrum.

However, it is already apparent that the Fatah leadership prefers not to join a Hamas-dominated coalition. Instead, it wants to focus on rehabilitation of the movement (convening the long-delayed 6th Congress, choosing new institutions and elaborating a new platform) while forcing Hamas to test its actual ability to manage Palestinian society and the PA. This approach may well reflect a desire to frustrate Hamas at every turn and produce a political deadlock that might prevent Hamas even from forming a government. If that turns out to be the case, the loss of Fatah’s hegemonic position or some dramatic development (e.g., Abu Mazen’s resignation) could – despite the Palestinian consensus against civil strife – lead to widespread violence between Fatah and Hamas.

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