

Palestinian election: a travesty of democracy

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As expected, Mahmoud Abbas, the new chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), also known as Abu Maazen, was elected president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) on January 9.

The election of Abbas has been welcomed by world leaders as representing a new dawn of democracy that holds out the prospect of a negotiated peace and the development of an independent Palestinian state.

There was, however, very little that was democratic about the election. It was held at gunpoint under Israeli military control, with Washington placing enormous pressure on the Palestinians to ratify the elevation of its favored PLO official. The Bush administration and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon turned the election into a form of blackmail, offering Palestinians the choice of voting in their preferred candidate or being shelled, bulldozed and starved.

President Bush immediately congratulated Abbas in a 10-minute phone call, during which he invited Abbas to visit the White House. This was an offer he conspicuously refused to make to the late Yasser Arafat, whom he branded a terrorist.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw offered his congratulations and declared, "The Palestinian people have already demonstrated their commitment to democracy." He went on, "The challenge now is for the new president to use his mandate to lay the foundations for a new Palestinian state."

French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier added his voice to the general acclaim. The vote was, he said, "a victory for democracy, a first victory for peace."

President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso said, "The elections went well." The EU sent 200 observers to oversee the election process and is one of the main financial backers of the Palestinian Authority.

There is a stark disparity between the talk of democracy and peace from these world leaders and the reality of the situation. Only one politician drew attention to the circumstances under which the election was held. Former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, who was head of the European Union election monitoring team, said, apparently without conscious irony, that it was "unique in the world to have general elections conducted democratically under foreign military occupation."

The election was held on terms imposed by the US and Israel, the latter having occupied the West Bank and Gaza since the 1967 war in contravention of UN resolutions. Even the

conditions for campaigning and voting were dictated by the Israeli armed forces.

The US and Israel had demanded that the election platform call for an end to violent opposition to Israel and its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, and made clear that Abbas was their preferred candidate.

It would indeed be unique if a democratic election could be held under foreign military occupation. But this is the new doctrine emanating from the White House. Bush is insistent that elections will go ahead under the military occupation in Iraq. The Palestinian and Iraqi elections serve the interests of a propaganda campaign that claims that US foreign policy is to introduce democracy into the Middle East.

Palestinian leaders close to Abbas have been only too happy to accept the fraudulent claim that the US is seeking to extend democracy in the region. Ziad Abu Amr said that the result "could be the beginning of a new era." He went on, "We may be laying the foundation for the second working democracy in the Middle East."

Abbas, echoed by the international media, was quick to claim that he had won a landslide victory. He won 62 per cent of the vote, which, on the face of it, is a sizeable majority. His nearest rival, Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, who is associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) but was standing as an independent, got 20 per cent of the vote. Abbas was chosen by Fatah, the largest organisation within the PLO, to be its presidential candidate following the death of Arafat in November.

More significant than Abbas' margin of victory was the low voter turnout. The Palestinian Authority have refused so far to publish an official figure, but press reports indicate that less than half of eligible voters cast ballots.

The low poll was despite the fact that voting was extended by two hours in an attempt to increase the turnout. The rules on residency were also changed during the election in an attempt to boost numbers. An extra 30,000 votes were added by these measures.

In East Jerusalem, the Israeli authorities made voting difficult in accordance with their insistence that the city is an integral part of Israel. They forced Palestinians there to cast absentee ballots and did not permit voting to begin until the afternoon. But the generally low poll cannot be accounted for in this way.

The low participation reflected enormous skepticism among

Palestinians, if not outright opposition, to the entire process, as well as lack of enthusiasm for the presumptive victor.

Abbas, who for a time was Arafat's prime minister, sought to wrap himself in Arafat's mantle after declaring himself the winner of the election, saying, "I present this victory to the soul of Yasser Arafat, and I present it to our people, to our martyrs, and to 11,000 prisoners of war" in Israeli jails. A veteran leader of Fatah, long-time financial manager of the PLO, and multi-millionaire who made his fortune in exile, Abbas played a key role in the Oslo Accords and opposed the four-year armed Palestinian uprising.

Negotiations with Arafat broke down at the Camp David talks in 2000 because Arafat would not accept the Israeli demand that the Palestinians give up Jerusalem. Even though the logic of his bourgeois nationalist political perspective demanded that he come to an agreement, he retained a personal commitment to the aspirations of the Palestinian people, to which he had devoted his entire adult life.

Sunday's election was organised with unseemly haste after the death of Arafat in order to shoehorn Abbas into office. The US and Israel have made clear that they expect the new president to quickly move to suppress Hamas and other groups that oppose the so-called "peace process" and support armed actions, including suicide bombings, against the Israelis. It remains to be seen whether Abbas will be able to satisfy the demands of the Israeli and Western governments that have praised his election.

The nature of the election indicates the character of any state that might be formed on the basis of a deal with Israel and the US. It is simply not possible to build a viable state or economy out of the scattered enclaves that have been defined as Palestinian territory. Whatever agreement Abbas is able to reach would leave the Palestinian people politically oppressed and economically impoverished. Only a tiny minority, like Abbas himself, would benefit from the funds allocated for the Palestinian Authority by the European Union and other donors. This would be a recipe for a corrupt regime of patronage, whose assigned task would be the suppression of popular resistance.

Sharon has expressed his willingness to meet with Abbas, but stressed that, "The main thing that needs to be concentrated on now, following yesterday's election, is that the Palestinians take action in the field of terrorism." The test for Abbas, he said would be, "the way he battles terror and acts to dismantle its infrastructure."

One of the main objections that Sharon and Bush had to Arafat was that he was unable or unwilling to suppress the al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Islamic Jihad and Hamas. They are now putting pressure on Abbas to move against these organisations.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad boycotted the presidential election, but both have accepted Abbas's legitimacy. They have expressed their willingness to move towards a ceasefire. Hamas spokesman Mushir al-Masri said, "We will work with

Mahmoud Abbas in what we believe is a sensitive coming period."

The willingness of Islamic Jihad and Hamas to accept Abbas's leadership point to the essential bankruptcy of a nationalist perspective, whether in a secular guise or in the form of religious fundamentalism. Neither secular nor Islamic nationalism has been able to offer the Palestinian people the prospect of a secure and peaceful future.

In his election campaign, Abbas made promises about bringing the refugees home and regaining control of East Jerusalem. To the extent that he won support, it was largely on this basis. However, Bush and Sharon will not allow him to carry out these promises.

Sharon has now won parliamentary support for his proposal to pull out of Gaza, but this plan does not offer any positive prospect for the Palestinians. Israel's construction of a wall around the Palestinian territories is proceeding. The residents of Gaza will find that they have exchanged a direct military occupation for something resembling a prison camp or ghetto. Israeli troops may be absent on a day-to-day basis, but Israel will still control the air space and reserve the right to send in troops at any time.

The illegal Israeli settlements in Gaza are to be removed under Sharon's unilateral plan, but settlements on the West Bank will be extended. They will be linked by a network of military roads which cut up land that is supposedly under Palestinian control and make daily life a permanent torment.

Whatever deal Abbas attempts to put together in the next weeks, no credibility can be given to the illusion touted by world leaders and the liberal press that Sharon's "withdrawal" from Gaza will lead to anything other than a continuation of the bloody suppression of the Palestinian people.



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