

Hamas victory in Palestinian election

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The Islamist organisation Hamas recorded a sweeping victory in Wednesday's election for the Palestinian legislative council. With 95 percent of the vote counted, Hamas was projected to secure 76 of the 132 seats in the parliament.

Fatah, the dominant faction within the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), won just 43 seats. Hamas's victory shocked Israel, the United States, and Europe. While the Islamists were expected to poll strongly, opinion surveys and exit polls had projected a narrow Fatah victory.

The election result has immense international as well as regional ramifications. Hamas's victory stunned the Bush administration, which had made every effort to engineer a Fatah victory. The *Washington Post* reported last week that the US secretly channelled \$2 million to Fatah in the final weeks of the campaign.

While Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice formally welcomed the election and issued platitudes about the Palestinian people giving the PA a "wake-up call" and "expressing their desire for change", the administration made clear that it considered the result illegitimate. "Anyone who wants to govern the Palestinian people and do so with the support of the international community has got to be committed to a two-state solution, must be committed to the right of Israel to exist," Rice declared.

Hamas continues to officially uphold the demand in its founding charter for the destruction of Israel. US officials have declared that the precondition for any dealings between Washington and a Hamas-led government is the organisation's repudiation of its call for Israel's destruction, and its renunciation of violence.

Washington's response to the election has again demonstrated the hypocrisy of the American government's claims that its war in Iraq and its support for Israel are part of an effort to bring democracy to the Middle East. If the voters choose a government deemed by the United States to be politically unfriendly, Washington simply refuses to accept the results of the

election.

The Palestinian vote sparked a political storm within Israel. Right-wing opponents of acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who has replaced the incapacitated Ariel Sharon, sought to make political capital from Hamas's win. Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu accused the government of allowing the creation of a terrorist "Hamastan", and blamed its withdrawal from Gaza for the situation.

On Thursday, Olmert convened a three-hour emergency cabinet meeting which included the head of Shin Bet and senior commanders in the military and intelligence services. "If a government should arise of which Hamas is a participant, the world and Israel will ignore it and render it irrelevant," Olmert declared after the discussion.

Clashes between Hamas and Fatah supporters broke out shortly after the election results were declared. Supporters of the two factions engaged in a brief gunfight in Ramallah after Hamas activists raised their green flag over the parliament building. The Islamists staged victory marches throughout Gaza and the West Bank, with members of Hamas's military wing, the Qassam Brigades, openly marching with their weapons through the West Bank city of Nablus.

The Palestinian legislature is elected on a split electoral system, with half the seats nominated through local constituencies and the other half through a proportional representation-based national list. According to the *New York Times*, Hamas won 30 of the 66 seats on the national list and 46 of the 66 seats at the local level, while Fatah won 27 of the national seats and 16 constituencies.

Hamas dominated in its traditional stronghold of Gaza. It also swept the West Bank, winning all nine seats in Hebron, four of the five seats in Ramallah, and secured a majority in Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilyah, and Tulkarm. Despite an Israeli ban on standing in East Jerusalem, Hamas won four of the six seats in the city. The other two constituencies were reserved for Christian candidates.

Smaller parties and candidates identified as independents won the remaining 13 parliamentary places.

Turnout of the 1.3 million eligible voters was reported at 78 percent.

It remains unclear whether the US and Europe will carry out their pre-election threat of cutting off funding to a Hamas-led government. Such a move would have unpredictable consequences, as it would likely lead to the collapse of the PA and the disintegration of its security forces, both of which are dependent on foreign financing. Former US President Jimmy Carter, who oversaw international monitoring of the vote, warned the US and Europe not to cease all funding, and pointed out that the Palestinian government is projected to run out of money by the end of next month.

It has been suggested that in order to conciliate the major powers, Hamas will nominate for prime minister one of the three nominally independent members of parliament who were elected with its support.

Fatah's election debacle demonstrates the degree to which the Palestinian nationalist movement founded by the late Yasser Arafat has been discredited in the eyes of the Palestinian people. Underlying the failure of the Fatah-led PLO is the unviability of a program based on a nationalist perspective to effectively oppose imperialist and Zionist domination of the region.

Popular disillusionment with Fatah has been enormously compounded since the creation of the Palestinian Authority by worsening social conditions and rampant official corruption under the auspices of Fatah. Mass poverty and unemployment affects every aspect of life for ordinary Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. About 65 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line of \$2.20 per day. A 2004 World Bank report described the economic situation as the "worst economic depression in modern history", with unemployment rates of 60-70 percent in Gaza and 30-40 percent in the West Bank.

Popular opposition was further fuelled by Fatah's authoritarian methods. One-third of the PA's budget is devoted to security, with the West Bank and Gaza having the largest number of police per head of population in the world.

Hamas downplayed its Islamic fundamentalist ideology during the election campaign, and instead focussed almost exclusively on Fatah's corrupt and ineffective record. The organisation nominated its national electoral list under the banner of "Change and Reform". Hamas also promoted its candidates' involvement in Islamic charities which provide food and education and medical services in the Occupied Territories. Numerous surveys and interviews

conducted in the Occupied Territories demonstrated that Hamas's support derived from people's disgust with Fatah rather than any surge in Islamist sentiment in Palestine.

Hamas's religio-communalist politics in fact offer no genuine alternative to the failed perspective of Fatah. Notwithstanding its anti-Israeli rhetoric, Hamas is ultimately seeking an accommodation with Western imperialism in the interests of those sections of the Palestinian elite for whom it speaks.

Hamas officials have indicated in the aftermath of the vote that they intend to introduce aspects of Islamic Sharia law. Palestine's Christian minority is deeply concerned about such moves, and many have indicated that they are preparing to emigrate.

The PA's cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei, announced its resignation hours before the official results were even announced. Two of Hamas's most senior leaders, Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Mashall, later telephoned PA President Mahmoud Abbas to try to negotiate a coalition government. "We want to meet with him to consult about the shape of the political partnership that we can achieve," Haniyeh declared. Despite these overtures, Fatah's central committee voted against participation in a coalition government led by Hamas.

The US urged Abbas not to resign as he had previously hinted he intended to do if Hamas won. The PA president has since indicated that he will stay in office, and will pursue any future negotiations with Israel through the PLO rather than the PA, thus potentially allowing him to leave Hamas out of the equation.



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