

# Palestinian election reveals widespread hostility to Abbas

**Rick Kelly**  
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Elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council, scheduled for January 25, are set to deepen the political crisis facing President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Public hostility to Abbas over its readiness to abide by the dictates of Washington and Tel Aviv has exacerbated the anger generated by the corruption and nepotism of the PA regime—manifest in the worsening social inequalities within the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The main beneficiary has been the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas. While the Islamists are seeking to bolster their position by negotiating a power-sharing agreement with Fatah, the PA might yet cancel the elections using the pretext of Israel's severe restriction on the right of Palestinians in east Jerusalem to vote and other anti-democratic measures.

For its part, Israel has been targeting Hamas for persecution and demanding that the PA clamp down on it and other militant groups—policies that could well fan the factional flames in the Occupied Territories into a civil war.

The Bush administration has repeatedly hailed both the Palestinian presidential election last January and the pending legislative elections as evidence of the US-sponsored expansion of “freedom” and “democracy” in the Middle East. In reality, the exercise has nothing to do with democracy. The election campaign has only served to demonstrate the Israeli occupation forces' domination of every aspect of Palestinian political and social life.

In the last few months, Israel has assassinated and arrested scores of candidates and party activists from militant groups. The Palestinian people have suffered countless Israeli attacks in the recent period, with military raids on towns and cities in the West Bank and repeated air strikes in Gaza.

The Israeli government, in collaboration with Washington, has dictated the terms under which the ballot is being held and initially refused Arab residents in East Jerusalem the right to vote. The international and Israeli media presented the decision of acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who took over after Sharon's stroke, not to impose a total ban on Palestinian voting in the occupied city as a major concession. But Israel will still disenfranchise tens of thousands of East Jerusalem voters. Less than 6,000 of the city's estimated 110,000 registered voters are eligible to cast a ballot (officially classified as a postal vote) at

an Israeli post office in the city. Others will be forced to pass through Israel's separation wall into the West Bank to vote. During the presidential election held last January, Israeli travel restrictions prevented thousands of Palestinians from reaching a polling booth.

Israeli authorities have also banned Hamas candidates from standing in East Jerusalem voting districts. The party's candidates have been arrested, election offices raided and ransacked, and campaign rallies attacked by police.

The Islamists have not been the sole focus of Israeli repression—a number of secular candidates, including those who denounce armed attacks in Israel, have been arrested and detained. The Israeli government considers any independent Palestinian activity in East Jerusalem as a challenge to its unlawful claim to sovereignty over the area. Candidates have been fined for carrying election posters, have received visits from Israel's Shin Bet security service in the middle of the night, and have reported the arrest of family members involved in campaign work.

Israel only permitted the legislative election to be staged at all after pressure from Washington. The Bush administration desires the election of Fatah under Abbas, following which the Palestinian president will be expected to accede to Israel's longstanding demand that Hamas and other militant groups in the West Bank and Gaza be forcibly disarmed.

To this end Washington has done everything it can to engineer a Fatah victory. It endorsed Abbas's postponement of the vote, which was originally scheduled for July last year. Both the Bush administration and PA hoped—in vain—that a delay would allow Fatah to reverse its sinking popularity. USAID and Madeleine Albright's National Democratic Institute has provided money and training to Fatah and other favoured election candidates.

Both the US and EU have threatened to suspend their financial contributions to the PA if Hamas is awarded any post-election cabinet posts. Fatah has used this ultimatum to warn impoverished Palestinian voters that a vote for Hamas could result in the termination of the already limited infrastructure development and social service provision that depends on funding from the major powers.

However, Fatah—which once commanded the allegiance of

masses of ordinary Palestinians—is deeply discredited. Life in the Occupied Territories is marked by mass unemployment and widespread poverty, while a tiny layer within the PA leadership has prospered through foreign financing and corrupt activities. Competition for power between the different factions—both within Fatah and contending groups—has led to gunmen fighting in the streets of the West Bank and Gaza in recent weeks.

Only a last minute compromise deal prevented Fatah from going into the election with two electoral lists—one drawn up by Abbas which favoured the “old guard” of returned Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) exiles, and the other pushed by younger Fatah militants aligned with Marwan Barghouti, who is imprisoned in Israel and takes a more hard-line stance towards Israel. The agreement has failed to satisfy every faction however, and a number of local Al Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade groups in the West Bank have threatened to disrupt the vote.

Different opinion polls estimate that Hamas will receive between 30 to 40 percent of the total vote. While Fatah is still thought to be between five to ten points ahead, the margin between the two organisations has shrunk in the last few months. Up to now the Palestinian legislature has been dominated by Fatah: Hamas boycotted the last legislative elections in 1996. It is difficult to forecast a likely division of seats following the ballot, as the 132-seat body will be elected through a mixed electoral system. Half the seats will be selected through a list-based system of proportional representation and the other half chosen through “winner-takes-all” district votes.

Disillusionment with Fatah, rather than any sudden growth of Islamist sentiment in Palestine, has led to Hamas’s rise. The Palestinian people have a deeply rooted secular political tradition, and Hamas has not emphasised its Islamic fundamentalism in the course of the election. It has instead campaigned with the slogan, “Change and Reform”, and has stressed Fatah’s corruption and the social and economic catastrophe in the Occupied Territories. Hamas has publicised its role in organising Islamic charity groups’ provision of free food aid, medical assistance and education.

Hamas’s participation in the legislative election is a further indication of the organisation’s determination to secure some of the spoils of power in Gaza and the West Bank. Hamas, an offshoot of the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood, opposed Yasser Arafat’s negotiations with Israel throughout the 1990s and denounced the Oslo Accords. Recently, however, a series of leading Hamas officials have publicly indicated that they are ready to do business with Tel Aviv.

Hamas’s election manifesto is its first official public document that does not include a call for Israel’s destruction. Senior members have also raised the possibility that this demand could soon be removed from the organisation’s founding charter.

Hamas’s election manifesto declares: “Yes to a free, independent, and sovereign Palestinian state on every portion of

the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem without conceding on any part of historic Palestine”. A number of Hamas leaders have indicated that they would be willing to negotiate with the Israeli government on the basis of this tacit acceptance of a two-state solution based on the pre-1967 borders. “We’ll negotiate better than the others, who negotiated for 10 years and achieved nothing,” Muhammad Abu Tair, the second candidate on the Hamas list, explained to *Haaretz*.

Hamas has already demonstrated its credentials as a possible partner for Tel Aviv and the imperialist powers at the administrative level in Gaza and the West Bank, following its victories in municipal elections last year. “They are hardworking,” one European diplomat declared. “They are strict with money; they enforce the rule of law; and they are trying to provide efficient services.”

World Bank officials have also been impressed by Hamas officials’ willingness to cover budget deficits by raising taxes and leasing municipal assets for commercial use. Islamist office-holders have also been in contact with neighbouring Israeli officials to coordinate refuse collection and electricity supplies.

There have been calls, particularly from within the European Union, to encourage Hamas into the PA, and its military wing into the official Palestinian security apparatus. The International Crisis Group released a report on January 18, “Enter Hamas: the challenges of political integration”, which called for Washington and Brussels to offer “a mix of carrots and sticks” to achieve this end. The report recommended following the approach taken by the British government to Sinn Fein and the IRA. As in Northern Ireland, the goal in Palestine is to utilise the nationalist forces to police their own people and prevent the emergence of an independent working class movement.

The Israeli government has ruled out such an approach. The “unilateral disengagement” scheme initiated by Sharon is specifically designed to preclude any negotiations with the Palestinians. Moreover, Hamas’s status as a “terrorist” organisation serves Israel’s ends by providing a useful pretext for its oppression of the Palestinian people.

The Bush administration can be expected to line up behind Tel Aviv, as it has on every significant issue in the region. Washington is likely to unambiguously endorse Israel’s demand that President Abbas launch a full-scale crack down on Hamas and other militant groups, which would inevitably lead to civil war in Gaza and the West Bank.



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