

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

December 26, 2005

HAMAS' VICTORY IN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

Meir Litvak

Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

Hamas' sweeping gains in the fourth round of the Palestinian Authority (PA) municipal elections, held on December 16, completed its evolution as the dominant faction in local politics, with significant ramifications for national Palestinian politics as well. Over 1,000,000 Palestinians now live in municipalities governed by Hamas, compared with about 700,000 in municipalities controlled by the hitherto dominant Palestinian movement, Fateh. This accomplishment may serve as a prelude to a Hamas victory, or at least a very great success, in the PA parliamentary elections scheduled for January 2006.

The victory of Hamas is part of a broader trend in the Middle East. Whenever free or relatively free elections take place, the Islamist movements either win – as in Iraq, Kuwait and Morocco -- or at least increase their representation considerably, as happened in Egypt under more constrained circumstances. This phenomenon highlights once more both the power of Islam as the primary framework of identity in the Arab world and the structural weakness of non-Islamist ideologies and political movements.

At the same time, the municipal victories are consistent with the particular evolution of Palestinian politics since the beginning of the latest round of confrontation with Israel in 2000, and they are as much a reflection of the crisis and

disintegration of Fateh as of the waxing strength of Hamas. The past six years have witnessed a worsening economic situation – a consequence of the fight against Israel -- the failure of the PA to function as a government, and rampant corruption within Fateh's ranks. All these factors have driven a growing number of Palestinians to support Hamas, whose efficient and reputedly honest network of social-welfare and religious propagation institutions (da'wa) have provided essential social services as a surrogate state. A corollary to this has been growing religiosity in Palestinian society, demonstrated by increasing mosque attendance, the rise in veiling among women, and Fateh's adoption of a religious discourse. The unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, which most Palestinians attribute to Hamas' military campaign, also helped boost Hamas' fortunes.

Moreover, Hamas has been able to overcome the killing by Israel of its two charismatic leaders, Ahmad Yasin and Abd al-'Aziz al-Rantisi, in March and April 2004. Indeed, the "gray" personalities of the new Hamas leaders may have enabled them to work together more effectively to further their movement's goals. Fateh, by contrast, has been unable to recover from the death of its founder and leader, Yasser Arafat. Fateh was always a heterogeneous movement but it is now threatened by total

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/~jcss/

www.dayan.org/

disintegration due to splits and rivalries between the older generation that came from Tunis and younger activists who have risen from the ranks inside the territories, as well as between rival security organs and a host of other groups and personalities. While Arafat could control the internal squabbles thanks to his charisma and manipulation, his successor, Mahmud Abbas, lacks both stature and a personal power-base, and he has failed to exert authority on the warring factions within Fateh or carry out the reforms necessary to salvage the movement. As armed groups, mostly associated with Fateh, terrorized the population, the PA's inability to stem the anarchy further undermined support for it. Likewise, Fateh's temporary split into two rival lists in the parliamentary elections undermined the enthusiasm and commitment of its activists to work for their movement's victory in the municipal election campaign.

Always attuned to public opinion, Hamas focused its municipal campaign on socio-economic issues and the fight against corruption, and its candidates enjoyed local prestige as heads of its welfare and educational institutions. But Fateh had little to offer voters on these issues because it has always lacked a social agenda, subordinating it to the national struggle and postponing its articulation to the day after liberation, and it failed to adapt itself to current voter concerns. Reflecting these differences, Hamas lists carried the words "Reform" and "Change," while Fateh's lists were named "The Martyrs."

It may be argued that Hamas' victory is more an indication of a popular desire to address local matters and put the internal Palestinian house in order rather than of widespread endorsement of Hamas' radical program and goals vis-à-vis Israel. Advocates of such views usually point to opinion polls that show great support among Palestinians for the resumption of negotiations with Israel and the pursuit of a two-state solution to the conflict.

However, the election results could also prove to be a crucial step in fulfilling Hamas' long-declared goal and strategy to become the dominant Palestinian faction that can influence if not dictate the Palestinian political agenda and even acquire a veto-power over Palestinian decision-making processes. And the growing power of Hamas will undoubtedly further complicate the already difficult task of advancing a political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In recent months, Hamas has expressed its intention to emulate the conduct of the Lebanese Hizbullah movement, which operates as a legitimate political party while keeping its military-terrorist apparatus against Israel intact and employing it whenever it deems that to be useful. Thus, Hamas has insisted that it will refuse to disarm or cease its attacks on Israeli targets even after it enters the Palestinian parliament. Clearly, such an eventuality is unacceptable to Israel and to those who aspire to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

However, Hamas' control of municipalities and future presence in parliament will confront it with tough ideological challenges. Since Palestinian mayors need to maintain almost daily contact with the Israeli authorities in order to deal with pressing social needs, Hamas mayors will have to choose between their ideological rejection of any contact or negotiations with Israel and the practical necessities of serving their constituencies. A similar dilemma with even greater political ramifications will arise once Hamas representatives take their place in the Palestinian parliament -- and especially in the PA government -- if negotiations are resumed. A few Hamas leaders in the West Bank have already voiced a readiness to consider a more pragmatic line, but so far they are in the minority; the majority still opposes any negotiations for peace.

KEYWORD: Palestinians