

**L'IMPORTANZA DELLE ELEZIONI COMUNALI IN PALESTINA
LA SICILIA
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ENGLISH TRANSLATION

"Results and Impact of the Palestinian Municipal Elections"
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Elections for twenty-six local councils in West Bank were held on December 23, 2004. The Fatah political party, founded originally by Arafat and dominant in Palestinian Arab politics for the last forty years, won majorities on 12 of the councils, with Hamas, the militant Islamic party garnering majorities on 7 councils. In the remaining 7 councils no party gained a majority. In the 7 without a clear majority, Hamas and Fatah will seek to create coalitions with one another and/or with independent councilors elected. In two of those villages/towns, Hamas and Fatah ran joint slates for council seats and won. Voting for councils in an additional 600 Palestinian towns and villages is expected to be held next year, with most of the Gaza strip participating. There Hamas can be expected to have a stronger following and greater representation in local councils than in the West Bank.

The future strength of local councils and local councilors is directly dependent upon how much money they will be able to distributed to their constituents. That will be dependent on how much aid donors give directly to the municipal councils and how much is channeled through the Palestinian Authority or non-governmental organizations. Eighty one percent of the 145,000 eligible Palestinian voters participated in the municipal elections. This was a number similar to the turnout in the last Palestinian elections held in January 1996. In these elections, there were 306 local councils seats contested. Fatah won nearly 65 percent; Hamas won some 20 percent of the seats. Sixteen percent of the council seats were reserved for women. Of the 306 people elected, women defeated men 25 times, and won an additional 21 safe seats in a quota system. According to the Palestinian Higher Commission for Local Elections (HCLE), 49 percent of those who voted were women. In these elections, no one contested the fairness of the voting itself, a condition similar to the January 1996 presidential and legislative council elections where there were relatively few irregularities. This was not

the Ukraine!

In the upcoming January 9, 2005, Palestinian elections for president of the Palestine Authority, Mahmud Abbas is the sole serious candidate. In 1996 when Arafat was elected president, he received 80% of the vote against a relatively unknown female candidate. In those elections, due to its relative weakness across the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip, Hamas decided not to field a presidential candidate then; for similar reasons, Hamas will not field a candidate in this presidential election either. Turn out in the January 2005 presidential elections is expected to be less than in 1996 or in the recently completed municipal elections. If less than fifty per cent of the voters turn out, even with Abbas winning as expected, it will be a slap at the traditional old guard Fatah leadership of which Abbas is its personification in a post-Arafat Palestinian world, and/or it will show that Fatah needs to run candidates in the spring Palestine Legislative Council (PLC) elections who will truly represent the interests of their constituents and not their own personal interests. According to David Makovksy, a senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the elections in the spring will be trickier for Hamas, where it will field candidates. "In those upcoming legislative council elections," says Makovsky, "there will be balloting in Gaza, which has been Hamas's traditional stronghold, and Hamas also hopes to capitalize on the image of corrupt PA officials. Hamas has been able to depict itself as free of corruption since it has functioned until now as a volunteer charity, enjoying all these years the luxury of criticizing from the sidelines rather than being forced to govern." Indeed, Hamas will have to go beyond criticizing the PA to showing it can offer responsible leadership in providing goods and services in a governing bureaucracy, not just providing social and welfare services. Governance requires making compromises and choices, some of which will not be aligned or compatible with Hamas party ideology that calls for Israel's destruction.

Between now and the the May 2005 elections, when funding again flows to the Palestinian Authority, some of the functions which Hamas has provided to the Palestinian population, especially in Gaza, may be taken over by PA ministries and officials, thereby undermining some of Hamas's traditional areas of popular support. Hamas will need to find a way to participate in the political process and still curry favor with its constituents.

If and when down the road, the PA leadership enters into negotiations with Israel about final status issues, like Jerusalem, settlements, borders, refugees, and prerogatives of the Palestinian state to be, Hamas can be expected to take the hard and uncompromising political line on all these issues, and be especially adamant in refusing to compromise at all on the issue of Palestinian refugee hopes of returning to what is present day Israel. Hamas will continue to want Israel's Jewish demographic majority to disappear in favor of a Moslem Arab state heavily reliant upon Islam as its guiding compass.

Finally, after the municipal, presidential, and legislative elections are past, those Palestinian candidates who fail or succeed in any of these contests may down the road decide to be candidates for the proposed 150 member Palestinian parliament to be set up, when a Palestinian state eventually evolves. In the meantime, the multiple Palestinian election campaigns, unimpeded discussion of public issues, and an emerging civil society all point to the firm construction of democratic practices free of intimidation and violence. If only the same could be said for Iraq.

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