

Abbas' Voice Resonates with Palestinians

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In his campaign speeches, Mahmoud Abbas repeatedly emphasized issues that would have been alien to his predecessor and longtime mentor, Yasser Arafat.

He focused, for instance, on restoring rule of law and ending the fouda -- or chaos -- that has engulfed Palestinian life. He opposed corruption and vowed to enhance the role of women, improve the standard of living and confiscate illegal weapons -- all issues that Arafat refused to discuss. Abbas consistently and pragmatically emphasized that violence is counterproductive to Palestinian aspirations for statehood.

But what wasn't clear until election day on Sunday -- when Abbas won an overwhelming victory as president of the Palestinian Authority -- was whether Palestinians on the street were responding to his messages or whether they were locked into the angry, intifada-era conflict politics that Arafat for so long represented.

Now an exit poll of 900 voters from the West Bank and Gaza, taken by Bir Zeit University outside Ramallah, suggests that indeed, most Palestinians are focused not on revenge or on continued suicide bombings but on a more forward-looking agenda of nation-building and a return to normalcy. Peace talks are high on the public agenda.

According to the exit polls, when asked what effect they thought the election would have, the top three responses of Palestinian voters were improving the performance of the Palestinian Authority, improving the economic situation and improving internal security. Many voters also said they believed that the election would lead to a reduced impact of Israeli roadblocks and a resumption of ties with Israel.

When people were asked to identify their own priorities, the top answers were an Israeli withdrawal from cities and improvement in the economic situation (tied for first place), and the next most common answer was a resumption of talks with Israel. Interestingly, in Gaza, improving the economy edged out the Israeli withdrawal. This may reflect the fact that Gaza is poorer than the West Bank, as well as the fact that Israel has already committed to pulling out of the area.

Finally, when asked what it was that determined which candidate they supported, voters named the following: the bona fides of the candidate, the candidate's ability to improve the economic conditions, his integrity and his ability to achieve his platform while bolstering democracy.

Of course, creating democratic institutions is easier said than done, but Sunday's election was an important step

along the way. As Hassan al Batal, a commentator in the Palestinian daily Al Ayyam, wrote: "Today, the Arab peoples are feeling jealous of the Palestinians." In general, according to a Jerusalem Media Communications Center poll taken just after Arafat's death, more Palestinians are optimistic about the future than since the beginning of the intifada in 2000, and the number of Palestinians who say they oppose attacks against Israel jumped from 26% in June 2004 to 51% in December 2004, the highest level since the intifada began.

Abbas' wide margin of victory has dual meaning. On one hand, it establishes the mandate for him to pursue his goals and gives him the legitimacy to veer from the course of violence.

At the same time, it also creates a yardstick for both his admirers and critics to gauge his own performance under the standards he sets. At the heart of democratic governance stands the idea of accountability, a theme that Abbas has endorsed. Many, including the United States, can help Abbas demonstrate that he is delivering on his message of improving Palestinian daily life. There are many ways to achieve this, including renewing Israeli-Palestinian security coordination (which could minimize the security risk of lifting checkpoints), restoring calm and creating an environment where economic progress can be enhanced.

The U.S. should act in a manner that enables Abbas to implement his democratically affirmed mandate. Only he can act, but at the same time, the U.S. should not wait for him to fail before lending a hand. It should view the establishment of democratic institutions as consistent with President's Bush's vision for a more democratic Middle East.

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