

Election Can Reshape World for Palestinians

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This Sunday, Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem will cast their votes at more than 3,000 polling places and elect a new president of the Palestinian Authority. The turnout is expected to be high, and Israelis have promised to lift checkpoints that otherwise might impede the voting.

Unlike Iraqis going to the polls three weeks later, Palestinians will not fear for their personal security as they vote. Moreover, unlike the Sunnis in Iraq who fear the elections will legalize Shiite dominance -- and thus feel as though they have little stake in the Jan. 30 vote -- Palestinians across the political spectrum see their elections more positively. For them, the only way to ensure a peaceful, not violent, succession to Yasser Arafat is to have an electoral process.

I say process because most Palestinians would like to legitimize new leadership. Arafat may have been an icon, but Palestinians also saw corrupt leadership, unconstrained by institutions or laws, and offering little prospect for change.

The election will be the first of several designed to transform the internal reality. Municipal elections, Legislative Council elections and elections in Fatah -- the most important of all Palestinian factions -- will produce leaders other than Arafat who have legitimacy and who, in all likelihood, will represent a new, younger generation.

That is certainly the objective of Palestinian reformers. Ironically, those who seek such an outcome are supporting Mahmoud Abbas, someone who is certainly not a next-generation figure. He joined Fatah in the 1960s, was a contemporary of Arafat, returned to the territories after the creation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, and for a brief period in 2003 was its first prime minister.

But he is seen as someone who is committed to creating a rule of law, good governance and the institutional sharing of power. Having just returned from a visit to Gaza City and Ramallah, I was struck by the strong support reformers gave Abbas. Looking ahead to actually producing change, they have set their sights on Abbas getting more than 60% of the vote. With such a vote, they believe he will have a mandate to change course even in advance of the elections in May for the Legislative Council -- elections in which militant factions, including Hamas, will compete. They don't expect him to produce a revolution. Rather, they see him beginning a process with leading reformers and the new guard of Fatah brought into his Cabinet. They believe with a strong showing, he can make such appointments and

begin to develop new laws and enforce them.

For the reformers, the watchwords are institutions and accountability. Both were anathema to Arafat. Abbas and those around him will now seek to develop an accountable leadership for the first time in Palestinian history. Starting election day, the indicators of how he is doing will be his vote total, his Cabinet appointments and his energy in trying to produce immediate tangible benefits on the ground for Palestinians. The better he does in these areas, the better he will do in building his authority to take on more politically charged issues.

Of course, the real test in the eyes of most Palestinians will be whether life gets better. Ending lawlessness, chaos, a devastated economy and Israeli checkpoints that preclude freedom of movement are how Palestinians will measure Abbas.

And here he faces internal and external challenges. The two are intertwined. As long as there are independent militias, with their own arms, aims and the impunity to attack Israelis, the Israeli government is not going to lift the siege of the territories -- and life will not improve for Palestinians.

Indeed, while Israel will lift the checkpoints for three days leading up to and including the vote, Abbas will face the reality that the checkpoints will be re-established after his victory -- hardly the way to herald a new day.

More than anything else, this argues for Palestinians and Israelis to reach understandings sooner rather than later. Abbas is engaging in a "national dialogue" to get all Palestinian factions to agree to a cease-fire. He aims to stop all attacks against Israelis and use that to justify an end to Israeli checkpoints, incursions into Palestinian cities and villages, and targeted killings. For its part, Israel will want to see that Hamas and others cannot use a cease-fire to rebuild their capabilities and resume terror as soon as they are able.

On their own, the two sides are not likely to quickly bridge their differences on the meaning and application of a cease-fire. But time is not the ally of a new Palestinian leadership. It needs to show payoffs quickly. It needs to show that its way works.

The United States needs to be active in helping them and in stepping in to broker clear understandings on what the cease-fire is and is not. This is not the time to focus on issues that Abbas has no authority to deal with, such as Jerusalem, borders and refugees. But it is the time to help create an environment in which a new Palestinian leadership is given the chance to succeed.

Dennis Ross is counselor at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* and a former U.S. envoy to the Middle East under Presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush. ❖

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