

Are All Politics Local? A Look at Palestinian Municipal Elections Results

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The first round of West Bank municipal balloting occurred on Thursday, December 23. Voting was held in twenty-six locations, ranging from Jericho to smaller towns and villages. This was the first round of local voting since 1976. The results—a Fatah victory but Hamas gains—have important implications for the next Palestinian elections.

Elections: A Limited History

There were no local elections when the West Bank was under Jordanian control, before 1967. In 1972 and more broadly in 1976, Israel decided to organize municipal elections in the West Bank with expanded voter rolls. At that time there were no Palestinian public opinion polls, and the elections offered the prospect of producing legitimate leaders with whom Israel could discuss local autonomy within the context of Israeli rule. Some believe that Israel hoped to build an alternative grassroots leadership as a counterweight to the growth of the PLO, whose leadership was endorsed at an Arab League summit in Rabat in 1974. Whatever Israel's reasons, the results were not comforting to it. The election lists of the Fatah nationalists defeated those lists sympathetic to Jordan's King Hussein, as well as the more radical Communist lists. Observers viewed those elections as a bellwether of Palestinian sentiment, which was moving away from the Hashemites. A dozen years later King Hussein renounced his ties to the West Bank.

While the agreements with Israelis in the Oslo process called for municipal elections in addition to the general (presidential and parliamentary) elections of 1996, Arafat long refused to hold them. Arafat had viewed municipal elections as a means of diluting his authority, stripping him of the ability to use municipal positions as an outlet for cronyism. This was in no small measure why there have been no local elections between 1976 and this weekend. This election was a meager concession that Yasser Arafat made to the Young Guard of Fatah, not long before his death.

In this context, the success of the election process was remarkable. According to the Palestinian Higher Commission for Local Elections (HCLE), there was a turnout of 81 percent among the 144,000 Palestinians who were eligible to vote. A broad cross-section participated in the voting, with only the small Islamic Jihad calling for boycotting this round. Of the voters, HCLE estimated 49 percent were women. Of the 306 people elected, women defeated men 25 times, and won an additional 21 safe seats in a quota system to widen the representation of women, bringing the total to 46 women elected to office. Moreover, Palestinians did not contest the fairness of the voting itself, suggesting there was no substantial voter fraud.

Fatah's Victory, Hamas's Gains

The mainstream movement Fatah scored a victory, but Hamas posted solid gains. Of twenty-six West Bank local councils where elections were held, it is clear that Fatah won more votes than Hamas, with estimates varying as to the margin of victory. The general figure used is that Fatah won twelve councils, Hamas won nine, and another five councils were won by independent candidates. Since these elections were seen by some in the Palestinian Authority (PA) as creating momentum for Fatah as it prepares for January 9 presidential elections, legislative elections in the spring, and further municipal elections over the next year, the marginal victory of Fatah has fueled analysis about whether Hamas exceeded expectations and what this might mean for the upcoming balloting. But while the results should be a wake-up call for Fatah, one cannot draw sweeping conclusions from Hamas' relative success over the weekend. There were a number of unique factors that should caution analysts against overinterpreting these first elections.

First, the American dictum that all politics are local seems to have been validated in the West Bank last week. Candidates were listed on the ballot merely as individuals, their affiliations not identified. In certain locales individuals informally announced their affiliations ahead of the balloting, but in other places they did not. This means that both parties are now claiming independent individuals as their own, while in fact neither side knows for sure. "Fatah counted every independent as one of its members," Palestinian political analyst Hani al-Masri told the Christian Science Monitor. "Hamas counted every religious candidate as one of its members."

Moreover, according to veteran Palestinian pollster and political analyst Khalil Shikaki, the individuals who ran in a

given town or village were names favored by the large families living there. "In many ways, this election was a victory for the large families," he said. "Of the names we have seen, about 40 percent of the winners came from large families." Some of these families are large enough that they posted candidates for more than one party, seeking to maximize the number of family members voted onto a given local council. This suggests that local clans are likely to remain important power brokers when it comes to making local decisions.

Third, Hamas's appeal is particularly strong when the issues at play are local. Hamas has developed a reputation for providing local social services not administered by the PA, thus attracting voters who believe that a vote for Hamas would yield improved social services. As Shikaki says, "There is nobody better in playing the civil society card among the Palestinians than Hamas. They have been at this for a long time." Hafez Barghouti, editor of the PA-affiliated al-Hayat al-Jadida, reportedly said, "This is not about the Oslo agreement or the road map; it is about who offers services for the people."

Fourth, Fatah's electoral strategy was sometimes divisive. It ran competing lists in some locales, thereby minimizing its impact. For example, the Young Guard of Fatah scored very well in Jericho and its leaders will head the city, while names put forward by a top Arafat confidant, Saeb Erekat, were virtually shut out.

In fact, more generally Fatah has been gaining ground relative to Hamas. In recent polls, both the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research and the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center found that support for Fatah rose to 40 percent, while support for Hamas was less than half that.

Implications for the Next Elections

Last week's local elections might not have been a test of strength, but they should be a wake-up call for Fatah as the January 9 presidential and likely spring legislative elections loom. With Hamas calling for a boycott of the January 9 election, there is no genuine Islamist rival to Abbas, although he does need to be concerned about turnout if many adhere to the boycott. Abbas loyalists are aiming for a 70 percent turnout that will yield a 60 percent majority against a field of five opponents, only one of whom has a national reputation.

The situation will be trickier in the spring when, for the first time, Hamas will contest the parliamentary election. (It boycotted the last parliamentary election in 1996.) In those elections 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. Having won office in nine localities, "this is the first time Hamas will take responsibility in the society," Hafez Barghouti is reported to have said. "It is the first time it will have to go beyond criticism of the PA, to work in the field like a party responsible for coordinating daily life, and as a party with a duty to society."

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