

The Polls: What the Palestinians Really Voted For

A West Bank pollster finds more moderate trends underlying the Hamas victory

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Results of the Palestinian parliamentary elections caused a shock to the Palestinian political system. Despite the expectations that Hamas will indeed do very well, as all public opinion surveys indicated, no polls expected it to win a majority of the seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council. To be fair, Hamas only received 45% of the popular vote; it was the nature of the electoral system which magnified the existing fragmentation of Hamas' opposition that gave the Islamist movement the 56% of the seats it won. The divided Fatah and four other secular parties won 55% of the popular vote but only 41% of the seats.

Five years of intifada, starting in September 2000, earned the party significant public support; many Palestinians supported Hamas' bombing attacks against Israelis, which they viewed as a justified response to Israel's disproportionate use of force against, and collective punishment of, the civilian population. The unfulfilled expectations that followed the election of Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority last year--for better governance, economic prosperity, and progress in the peace process--increased support for Hamas by 40 percent in a single year. Yet even that translated into only 35 percent support among the public at large. Their remarkable showing in the election shows that their supporters were more determined to vote than Fatah's, and perhaps that some number of former Fatah supporters were lodging a protest vote.

Indeed, the most interesting aspect of the rise of Hamas is that its own voters, as demonstrated in exit polls, do not share its views on the peace process. Three quarters of all Palestinians, including more than 60 percent of Hamas supporters, are willing to support reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis based on a two-state solution. During the last ten years, the trend among the Palestinians has been to move away from hard line attitudes and to embrace moderate ones. Indeed, more than 60 percent of Hamas voters support an immediate return to negotiations with Israel. Had the issue of peace been the most important consideration in these elections, Fatah would certainly have won. But the peace process was the least important issue for the voters.

And no, bread and butter issues were not central either; those too would not have driven Palestinians to vote for Hamas. The two most important issues for the voters were corruption in the Palestinian Authority--which is dominated by Fatah-- and the inability of the PA to enforce

law and order. On both counts Hamas posed a clear alternative--with its reputation for discipline and incorruptibility. The third and fourth priorities were economic prosperity and the peace process.

Knowing that polls showed that more than 85 percent of the public believed the PA was corrupt and that more than 80 percent felt unsafe in their homes and neighborhoods, perhaps the most brilliant achievement of Hamas in the weeks leading up to the elections was to elevate the importance of these two issues to the top of public agenda. By the time the public went to the polls, almost two-thirds had placed these two issues on the top of their priorities. Less than one quarter viewed economic issues as crucial and only 15 percent viewed the peace process as a top priority.

By contrast, the U.S. administration, which sought to promote the peace process and economic prosperity while at the same time advance the cause of elections and Palestinian democracy, undermined its own cause; its actions did little to help the PA and Abbas to improve economic conditions for Palestinians or to restore public confidence in diplomacy and negotiations. To the contrary, Washington fully supported Israel's unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip, a step that was perceived by more than 80 percent of Palestinians as victory for armed resistance. Unilateralism deprived Fatah of one of its greatest assets, the ability to negotiate an agreement with Israel that would end the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

This was a tactical victory for Hamas, not a strategic one; voters want political solutions, not political Islam. Survey research during the last decade clearly demonstrates strong public support for liberal democracy among Palestinians. Indeed, most view Israel's democracy more positively than any other in the world, followed by America's. Similarly, most Palestinians view gender equality as one of the most important American achievements. If Hamas wants to solidify its support, its leaders would do well to keep all this in mind.