

# **The Chickens Come Home to Roost**

**George Joffé . Investigador asociado, IEEI**

It really should be no surprise that Hamas has won the Palestinian legislative elections so convincingly, although none of us had forecast such an outcome. And the success was certainly convincing. The 76 seats it won against Fatah's 43 seats are so distributed that it won the majority of seats in nine of the eleven electoral districts of the West Bank and in four of the five electoral districts in the Gaza Strip.

Nor is it clear how many of the seats won by Fatah were really won by Fatah Tanzim, the branch of the movement that supports Marwan Barghouti, now in prison in Israel but close to the Hamas leadership and allegedly the person who persuaded it to adopt the electoral route to power. After considerable internal tensions, the two branches of the movement had agreed to put forward a unified list which obscured the real support for Fatah. In other words, the disarray now facing Fatah may be far worse than the bare figures suggest.

## **The reasons**

The reasons for the victory, too, are not difficult to identify. For years, Fatah and its leadership have been accused of corruption and complacency. Most of its leaders, embedded in the PLO and most of them returnees from Tunis – the rijal Tunisi – have profited hugely from the peace process which started with the Oslo Accords, as their ostentatious villas in Gaza and Ramallah attest. Many of them, adding insult to injury, stashed their wealth in banks in Tel Aviv and abroad. Even for their loyal followers, their behaviour was difficult to stomach and, although Yasir Arafat who was not personally corrupt, had the prestige to stifle the crescendo of protest, Mahmoud Abbas does not.

In any case, many former Fatah supporters who had always lived in the Occupied Territories, were not prepared to tolerate such behaviour and it was out of this movement that Fatah Tanzim emerged in the mid-1990s. Once again, Yasir Arafat was able to preserve a fragile unity that his successors cannot, even during the worst period of Israeli repression in the past five years. But he could not stem the rising tide of popular anger against the inefficiency and incompetence, let alone corruption of the administration that he ran, with an increasingly fitful hand, from the ruins of the Muqata'ah in Ramallah.

Mr Abbas has had virtually no chance of countering this during the last tumultuous year. His administration, isolated politically by the West because it could not prevent Palestinian violence in the face of the repression and ignored by Israel, has also been ineffectual, barely keeping its head above the worsening chaos through flows of European and American aid. He has had to stand silently by as Ariel Sharon unilaterally replaced the Quartet's "road-map" with his own unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, hoping that at least the Palestinians would be allowed to handle security there after the Israeli Defence Forces and the settlers withdrew.

And then, of course, the chaos worsened, whether by accident or design, as some Palestinian leaders tried to draw Hamas into confrontation, in order to discredit its electoral appeal. Worse still, Mr Abbas has been able to do nothing to counter Israel's unilateral annexation of Palestinian land through the Separation Wall. Furthermore, he like all Palestinians – although Western statesmen seem, curiously, to be ignorant – knows what Kadima ultimately intended, as tunnels and roads were also built to permanently separate settlers and Palestinians.

In effect, 8.5 per cent of the West Bank to the West of the Wall was to be annexed, as was 9 per cent to its East on which settlements to be retained by Israel stood. Then a further 28.5 per cent of the region along the Jordan Valley was also to go for security reasons. Nobody, certainly no Palestinian, believes that a state could be constructed the remaining, fragmented 54 per cent of the West Bank!

That, of course, provided a second reason for Hamas's stunning victory. The third was, quite simply the awesome violence that Israel has tried to use to crush Palestinian resistance over the past five years. Over the five years of the al-Aqsa Intifada to date, 992 Israelis and 3,708 Palestinians had died in the violence. Up to the beginning of 2005, 5,522 Palestinian homes had been destroyed, rendering over 22,000 Palestinians homeless, according to the Israeli civil rights organisation, Bet'selem.

The figures do not reflect the terrible violence of the past five years, for which Fatah seemed to have no antidote but for which Hamas's unvarying message offered the psychic salve of unbending resistance. In any case, Palestinians well know that Fatah did compromise over the years from 1993 onwards and received precious little encouragement for its pains. Many look towards the example of Hizbullah in the Lebanon and see the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, wrongly, as the result of sustained resistance.

### **What will Hamas do?**

It seems clear that Hamas is as surprised as Fatah, Israel and the United States at the size of its victory and has, as yet, little idea of how it will address the task of government that now confronts it. It will certainly wish to demonstrate that it will be as incorruptible in government as it has apparently been in its role in opposition and in providing humanitarian support in Gaza over the years. There are fears that it will introduce an austerity into public life that Palestinians will find difficult to tolerate and the Palestinian Christian community certainly fears for its future.

The Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, has said that he will stay on in office, provided any government that emerges does not espouse violence – although, as leader of Fatah, his position will be ambiguous, to say the least! Hamas leaders Ismail Hanyieh and Mahmoud al-Zahar have made it clear that they seek a government of national unity, although Fatah has rejected such a proposal, apparently preferring opposition instead.

Both have avoided addressing the issue of future relations with Israel directly, although they must know that it will be inescapable. If the electoral campaign is any guide, Hamas will in practice accept realities and deal with Israeli officials on a day-to-day basis, provided the violence ends, as the administration of Palestinian territories will be

impossible if it does not. Indeed, it already knows this because of its success in municipal elections last year.

Hamas spokesmen have also indicated that the de facto truce of the past year will also be maintained, provided there is no violence and Israel eventually withdraws from the West Bank, as it has in Gaza. There are already proposals to fold the Hamas militias into the Palestinian security forces, although, given the role of Fatah within them, this could prove to be difficult, to say the least. Thus, in practice, there is no reason to assume that violence between Palestinians and Israelis will increase – unless, of course, Israel wishes this to occur!

The real stumbling block, of course, lies in the Hamas charter with its promise to eradicate the Israeli state, which the leadership probably cannot abandon. Yet, even Sheikh Abdessalam Yacine, shortly before his death at Israel's hands, had hinted that Hamas could live with and accept political realities so that – in practice – accommodation could be possible. And the yearlong ceasefire suggests that violence is not the only path that Hamas will follow.

### **Shock and horror**

Ironically enough, the biggest problem is likely to be the attitudes of the West and of Israel to the political shock they have experienced. The Israeli government, after a brief hesitation in which it refused comment, not surprisingly voiced its shock and anger at the result. Inevitably, it promised that it would not deal with a Hamas-led government face-to-face until the latter had ended all violence and recognised the Israeli state.

It may even have an alternative it would like to push in the form of the imprisoned Marwan Barghouti who was, surprisingly, allowed to address Western television audiences from his prison cell shortly before the elections. He would make an ideal alternative to the impotent Palestinian president if the situation degenerates. He, however, would also support Hamas, so that option may well now be closed.

Yet, even here, things may not be quite as they seemed, for two opinion polls published in Israel suggested that almost half of the Israeli public now wanted a negotiated end to the violence. The polls were taken before the results of the Palestinian elections were fully known but after a Hamas victory had seemed inevitable. The daily, Yedioth Ahronoth, reported that 48 per cent of Israelis would approve of negotiations with a Hamas-led government, whilst its rival, Ma'ariv, noted that 40 per cent would do so if it renounced its aim of destroying Israel.

The real difficulties, however, seem to reside in Washington and Brussels. President Bush, it is true, welcomed the success of the democratic process in Palestine but at the same time refused to consider dealing with terrorists who espoused violence and did not recognise the State of Israel. Subsequently the United States threatened to cut off its aid to the Palestinian National Authority unless a Hamas-led government met these criteria.

The European Union's position, which was confirmed by its special representative in the Middle East, Marc Otte, had been articulated some days before by the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Xavier Solana. In Tel Aviv he had made it clear that a Hamas victory would force the Union to reconsider its

aid policy, “because the European taxpayer could not be expected to pay for violence.” European statesmen, particularly the British, hurried to support his position.

## **Outcomes**

The difficulty is that, up to the Hamas victory, both Europeans and Americans had made it clear that democracy in the Middle East was their primary aim. Even worse, the Palestinians had made their decision in what was generally recognised to have been a free and fair election. Now Western commentators suddenly discovered that the electoral process was not, in itself, sufficient evidence of democracy.

Instead, they claimed, a long apprenticeship would be necessary to develop the “habits of mind” that should accompany it – and, presumably, deny a group like Hamas its success. Had these developed, then there would be no problem of violence or threat to Israel’s existence, for true democracies could not espouse them. In reality, of course, this is to ignore history and the basic conundrum remains the same as ever.

The causes of Hamas’s attitude and the reasons for its victory lie in the duplicity and dishonesty of Israel in its dealings with the Palestinians, at least since 1993, if not before. They lie, too, in Western cowardice in refusing to confront Israeli behaviour, particularly in Europe. Nor can the distorted attitudes of American politicians, spurred on by the neo-conservatives and the evangelical Christian rightwing be ignored any longer.

In the end, provided Hamas’s behaviour demonstrates its sincerity over accepting political realities in practice, whatever its charter may say, they will all have to negotiate. If they do not; if they withhold funding and seek to provoke the removal of Hamas from power, they will cause the long-feared civil war in the Palestinian Territories and create a far greater threat to stability in the Middle East. It is surprising how much mess roosting chickens can make!