

Elections in Palestine: Progress or Regress

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Yasser Arafat's death on November 11, 2004, sparked off apprehensions regarding consequent political turmoil, civil war, increase in violence, confusion over future leadership and a subsequent state of chaos and anarchy in Palestine. However, to the surprise of the Israeli and international media, these perceptions were rebutted by the formation of a unified leadership¹ and participation of a majority of Palestinian factions, working collectively, though cautiously, towards the presidential election scheduled for January 9, 2005.

As was expected Mahmoud Abbas, popularly known as Abu Mazen, won comfortably by getting 62.3 per cent of the votes in the election that was relatively free and fair. Abbas, a moderate leader, also heads the dominant political faction Fatah² and faces an internal dilemma - of establishing a Palestinian democracy by taking the first and most important step of curbing extremist activities of militant factions. There are, nonetheless, certain discrepancies and deeper problems embedded in this fractured political system, which have to be tackled solely by the Palestinians in order to achieve their ultimate goal of a Palestinian State.

Arafat and the Palestinian cause: Till death not do us part

The Palestinians are still trying to overcome the shock of the demise of Yasser Arafat, the symbol of Palestinian nationalism and struggle. Greatly revered by all Palestinians, irrespective of their party or political affiliations, Arafat carried enough weight to influence grassroots opinion. Despite Israeli and American efforts to sideline Arafat, his struggle towards achievement of a Palestinian state was held in high esteem by the Palestinians, especially for bringing their cause to the forefront of international politics. It was, however, the 1987 *intifada* (uprising) in the West Bank that brought Arafat back from political hibernation and eventually in 1994 he became the head of the newly constituted Palestinian Authority (PA). Arafat subsequently installed most of his contemporaries, who were in exile in Tunis (known as 'Tunisians'), in major posts in the PA.

As the 'sole' leader of Palestine, Arafat before his death wore four different

Strategic Analysis, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2004.

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hats: he was the elected President (*al-ra'is*) of the Palestinian Authority (PA), the head of the interim government on the West Bank and Gaza Strip; the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)³; and head of the Fatah, which represents the mainstream Palestinian national movement and is the major faction within the PLO. However, in recent past, Arafat had come under attack and scrutiny by the Palestinians on charges of corruption, nepotism, cronyism, autocracy and repression. His mode of working included concentration of all power and authority in his hands, and he was known for keeping even close confidantes and co-party members on a short leash. This is also evident by the fact that he did not groom or encourage any co-party member to succeed him. Consequently, Arafat was politically ostracised by the Israelis and Americans, who refused to accept him as a leader and negotiating partner.

Mahmoud Abbas' election campaign and eventual victory was ironically emblematic of the 'godfather' legacy that Arafat left behind. Differing views between them particularly over the use of violence and deep schisms in perceptions and political vision led Abbas to resign from the Prime Minister's post in September 2003. However, Abbas had to use Arafat's symbolism during his campaign in order to appease the Palestinian populace for votes.

Palestinian politics has, as a result, not been devoid of contradictions, confusion and political chaos. This was very apparent following Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's announcement of the disengagement plan (February 2004), which saw various Palestinian factions grappling for a future share in power. July 2004 also witnessed a violent power struggle in the Gaza between the 'old guard'⁴ of the PA led by Arafat and his coterie and a younger generation of militiamen⁵, disillusioned and upset by the corruption rampant in the PA. The run up to the elections underscored these divisions and portrayed an agitated atmosphere of heightened emotions, unstable political conditions, sporadic security lapses and an alarming anxiety amongst the Palestinians over the Israeli and American roles in shaping their future.

Arafat's era, nonetheless, witnessed certain continuity, consistency and predictability in Palestine, as well as in its relations with Israel. Paradoxically, this created an atmosphere of impasse characterised by violent acts by Hamas and other militant groups on the one hand, and military operations by Israel on the other. The American role in stimulating the peace process came to naught as both the Israelis and the Palestinians failed to curb violence. Arafat's death led to the reopening of the peace process and the promise of establishing a Palestinian state by the end of 2005.

Mahmoud Abbas: The Lone Crusader?

Mahmoud Abbas, after taking over the mantle of the President of the PA, faces numerous challenges, most of which have been the main cause of contention between Israel and Palestine: the implementation of the Road Map (2003)⁶, the possibility of a Palestinian state, Israel's commitments on the disengagement plan, role of the Hamas and other groups, internal stability and curbing of violence.

Abbas, a 'Tunisian' is regarded as a pragmatist and an outspoken critic of violence (especially against the 'armed' aspect of the *intifada*) and was a key architect of the Oslo Accords. He has reiterated the key positions of Arafat, such as the formation of an independent Palestinian state, right of return of the refugees, the status of East Jerusalem, Israel's disengagement from the Gaza and the West Bank, discontinuing the construction of the Israeli wall and redrawing of boundaries according to the pre-1967 border.

He is well liked by the Americans and is supported by the Arab states. He seems, therefore, to be in a politically comfortable position to negotiate with the Israelis. At the same time, Israel too has demonstrated a willingness to conduct a dialogue with him. For a change, the circumstances are quite conducive for a negotiated settlement, and the onus is on Mahmoud Abbas to devise a strategy for working out the best deal for the Palestinians. In all likelihood, he will try to strike a balance between internal compulsions and external pressures.

Internal challenges, like restructuring the security services⁷ and curtailing their unlawful activities, will definitely demand a stringent approach. To gather all these incongruous elements under the umbrella of an organised political structure, Abbas will need unprecedented support and require major compromises from the Palestinians, to accomplish the eventual goal of establishing a truly independent Palestinian state. But his immediate task will be to address concrete matters related to internal development and stabilisation of the Palestinian society.⁸ In addition, he will undoubtedly face opposition within the Fatah, particularly from Arafat's 'Tunisian' co-party members who are unlikely to relinquish hold on their currently held powerful positions.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad: Compelled Participants

Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the main militant groups operating in Palestinian territories, boycotted the presidential elections, while at the same time calling for evolving a mechanism of 'joint' leadership in which they could play a part. Hamas is an extremely popular Islamist movement, which operates through its distinct, yet interlocked, political and military wings. An arch adversary of Israel, its leaders have been repeatedly targeted by the Israeli forces, whose sole aim has been to decapitate the group.⁹ However, its resilience and capability to recuperate simply reinforces Israeli fears that Hamas will continue to attack Israeli civilians, irrespective of any talks of truce and ceasefire.

Hamas is divided over the issue of a speculated ceasefire between its leaders in the West Bank and Gaza. Since the peace that is on offer is perceived by them as an attempt at consolidating Israeli control over the territories by other means rather than a genuine peace deal, they are, therefore, of the firm opinion that Israel will not voluntarily dismantle the settlements, share their control over Jerusalem, give up the water resources it now controls or agree to lift the economic restrictions that currently

constrain Palestinian trade with third countries. Instead, Hamas believes that Israel will prevaricate while using the PA as a substitute security force.¹⁰

However, Hamas' participation in the Municipal Elections on December 23, 2004 has obligated them to enter into the political process. Mahmoud Abbas will have to work arduously towards a ceasefire with the militant elements by either reaching an agreement with them or by combating them. The former approach seems to be more practical for achieving political cooperation and sharing power between Hamas and the PA. Thus, continuous attack on Israeli civilians will only weaken Hamas' political legitimacy and undermine its role in the future.

Conclusion

Many view Mahmoud Abbas' victory with cautious optimism. But a majority on both sides does envisage the onset of a peace process, however slow it might be, rather than regression. However, a long-term peace process would require both the Israeli and Palestinian leadership to compromise in order to settle the complex issues that confront them. Israel will be expected to withdraw to the pre-1967 borders, more or less, dismantle the settlements, re-route the fence, give up East Jerusalem, and finally come to an agreement over the right of return of Palestinian refugees. Abbas, on the other hand, will have to take responsibility to curb violent extremist factions, outline a ceasefire and restructure the internal state of affairs. Both Sharon and Abbas are confronted with extremist elements - Israeli right-wingers and settlers, and Palestinian fundamentalist and Islamic radicals - who act as a stumbling block to peaceful resolution.

Sharon who had previously avoided any negotiation with Arafat appears more inclined to hold talks now with a 'legitimate' partner in power. A unified leadership for the Palestinians, however, would imply calling an end to all militant and 'terrorist' acts, stronger ties with the US and meeting the Israeli and American demands. Mahmoud Abbas will have to couple pragmatism and moderation with strength and perseverance to sketch out a more stable and less chaotic future for the Palestinians – an elusive future which the Palestinians have been yearning for without much success.

However, the role of potential external actors like the US has wider agendas, than just pushing for elections or establishing democracy in the occupied territories. Elections, according to Bush Jr. would help in the formation of a Palestinian state in a more peaceful and prescribed manner. Nevertheless, a focus on the Middle-East peace process would help him in shifting attention from Iraq for a while, demonstrate his capability to usher in democracy (atleast in one part of the region) and gain more influence in Palestinian internal politics. However, the Bush regime has to re-order its priorities; concentrate on the internal stability in Palestine and assist in shaping an atmosphere conducive for talks between Sharon and Abbas.

Winning the elections was an easier task for Mahmoud Abbas as compared to

dealing with the ground realities in the post-election period. What would be challenging for him are the politico-security issues that require immediate attention. The next few months will indeed be a testing time for the Palestinians – outlining the contours of their future from the little they are offered and the little they might finally get.

References/End Notes

1. On November 11, former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas became the new Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), while Parliament Speaker Rawih Fattouh emerged as the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA). Under the Palestinian basic law, he can hold office for 60 days during which time elections should be held. Farouk Kaddoumi, the Tunis based chief of PLO's political department, is the new head of the Fatah. See "Polls in Palestine", *The Hindu*, New Delhi. November 19, 2004.
2. Fatah represents the mainstream Palestinian national movement and is the major and dominant faction within the PLO.
3. The PLO was formed in 1964 as an umbrella organisation dedicated for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. In 1968, Arafat became the chairman of the PLO.
4. This "old guard" or the Tunis gang comprises of the majority of Arafat's compatriots who returned with him to the West Bank in 1994.
5. Members of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, the armed wing associated with the Fatah was responsible for spearheading violence for reformation in the PA.
6. The most recent proposal of peace was in the form of the Roadmap, which was launched in June 2003 by the quartet comprising of U.S., Russia, United Nations, and the European Union. It is a goal driven, phase-by-phase route to bring about a solution between Israel and Palestine in two years.
7. These security forces, all a part of the Fatah, broke away and started functioning as armed groups. Their modus operandi resulted in violent infighting and criminal activities.
8. Reform, security for the citizens, growing poverty, unemployment, tackling corruption within the PA, streamlining the disorganized security services and overall development of the Palestinian society.
9. The killing of Sheikh Yassin in March 2004 and Abd al-Aziz Rantissi in April 2004 was a clear sign.
10. Gunning, Jeroen, "Peace with Hamas? The Transforming Potential of Political Participation", *International Affairs* 80, 2, 2004, p. 233.

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