

Sow a wind, reap a whirlwind

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The Palestinian people have made their choice, and Hamas has completed a journey from first intifada newcomers to sitting in power in the Palestinian Legislative Council. Detailed analysis of what the election results will mean for internal Palestinian politics may be pre-emptive at such an early stage, but a few observations can be made about the nature of Hamas' victory and the international response.

First of all, it is worth clarifying the factors behind Hamas' success. On the most basic level, Hamas has proved itself adept at the kind of organisation and tactics that any party requires in an election campaign. Building on its established reputation, it campaigned on the issues most important to the electorate; reform, change, and resistance. Its candidates came from diverse backgrounds, even including the Christian community.

A vote for Hamas was a vote against the Fatah-led years of institutional stagnation, corruption, and 'peace process' failure. Uncontested dominance and international flattery led Fatah to arrogance and dishonesty during the Oslo years, and yesterday they paid the price. However, a vote for Hamas was also a show of defiance to Israel, the US, and the so-called 'international community', all of whom now work themselves into contortions over how to least hypocritically applaud the democratic process and preserve the 'anti-terror' rhetoric.

Hamas' support throughout the 1990s was contingent on the state of negotiations with Israel. When peace appeared within reach, their popularity decreased, and when the naked force of the occupation was unleashed, their base grew. All the while, the network of welfare and social work extended, providing services to a people stripped of dignity and self-determination.

In the first few months of the second intifada, as the Israeli military met stones with bullets, Hamas was ready to fight fire with fire. As the American-funded F16s reduced to rubble Palestinian Authority buildings and government infrastructure, Hamas both offered the opportunity for revenge, and filled the vacuum left by the enfeebled Fatah-dominated PA.

The Palestinian people live in circumstances they feel powerless to change. The full military and state apparatus of a developed nation operate to keep them occupied and subjugated; everyday life from attending a wedding to buying property is subject to interference by the Israeli occupation. Thus the election, in providing an opportunity to briefly taste empowerment individually and collectively, was used to communicate the anger of a people torn between despair and steadfastness.

The reactions to Hamas' victory have been as sickeningly hypocritical as they have been expected. The British Prime Minister Tony Blair chimed in with the observation that Hamas must now "decide between a path of democracy or a path of violence", and this from a man who has gone to war at least as many times as he has won elections. President Bush pointed out that "you can't be a partner in peace if your party has got an armed wing", unfortunately invalidating the Israeli government's participation in peace talks, as well as most of the political parties he is keen to hand power over to in Iraq.

On the flagship BBC Radio 4 rush hour news programme 'PM', the presenter quizzed Israelis about whether Israel will 'speak' to Hamas. I am yet to hear a Palestinian being asked whether or not they are feeling magnanimous enough to 'speak' to Israelis, but of course, the colonized must be told who they can, and can not, choose as their representatives.

Hamas will face numerous and significant challenges, as it adapts to the accountability of power. Policy decisions are trickier than critique from the outside, and inner tensions within the movement will need resolving. Moreover, some secular-minded Muslims, and Christian Palestinians, might harbour anxieties towards an Islamist trend in society powered by the ruling faction. All these issues will take time to play out, and there are no easy answers.

Those responsible for pushing a people into a strategy of armed resistance should choose silence faced with the will of the Palestinian electorate; those punished for years of negligent rule should choose humility faced with the judgment of their people. This apparent political 'earthquake' has left many things unchanged; the intransigence of the occupation, continued Israeli land seizure, a traumatised Palestinian society. The newly-elected Palestinian representatives have much to do.