

The near-miracle of polling day in Nablus

Shahid Malik writes in The New Statesman

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Magnificent, awesome, inspiring: all words used by international observers to describe the Palestinian elections, and they were not exaggerating. With four other British parliamentarians--Richard Burden, Kerry McCarthy, Lord Kilclooney and Pauline McNeill--I went to the West Bank and witnessed a near-flawless exhibition of democracy in action. The turnout of roughly 78 per cent would be envied across the western world, being almost a third greater than in recent US, UK and Israeli elections. As the Palestinians in Jenin refugee camp pointed out, they are at the top of the Arab premier league of democracies. In fact, they are probably the only Arab nation in that league.

After all we had heard about Palestine and its factional infighting it was a surprise to see the likes of Fatah, Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades and others campaigning in a carnival atmosphere outside polling stations. It felt more like Notting Hill than Nablus, though the two couldn't be further apart, as Nablus has the highest fatalities in the West Bank, the most severe structural damage and the most draconian restrictions on movement. But with music blaring, banners across the streets, flags waving, and men, women and children all savouring the atmosphere, comparison with London's carnival district could be forgiven in this instance.

The festivities were the more remarkable given that it all took place under Israeli occupation. Restrictions on the movement of candidates and voters undoubtedly reduced the turnout, and voters in East Jerusalem were the worst abused. Of more than 100,000 eligible Palestinian residents, only 6,300 were allowed to vote there, and even then they had to fill in their ballot papers at Israeli post office counters and hand them over to staff, entirely compromising the secrecy of the process.

I toured Nablus on polling day. The death toll there stands at 522 since 2000, including 80 children and 28 women. Curfews have lasted for up to 151 days. Earth mounds, concrete blocks, checkpoints, road gates and trenches have cut off the city from the rest of the West Bank, crippling the economy and denying Palestinians access to medical treatment. Jimmy Carter, leading a delegation of observers, weighed the difficulties of holding an election "under occupation" and concluded: "The fact the Palestinians managed to pull off these elections is a near-miracle."

As for the result, the landslide victory for Hamas demonstrated the truth of the old saying that opposition parties seldom win elections; governments lose them. Ten years of power for Fatah and little opposition to keep it in check had taken their toll, with corruption rife, a divided party unable to agree on its candidates, poverty the reality for many Palestinians (albeit made far worse by Israeli occupation) and peace seemingly as distant as ever.

International reaction has been confused. Polls show that 50 per cent of Israelis want their government to talk to Hamas leaders but so far this has not been reflected in the official Israeli response, nor in that of the international community. Threats to withdraw international funding unless Hamas renounces violence and recognises Israel's right to exist have undoubted leverage when 30 per cent of Palestinian families rely on such funding for survival. And according to James Wolfensohn, the big-power quartet's special envoy to the region, the Palestinian Authority is "basically bankrupt".

The future of Palestine is now in the hands of President Mahmoud Abbas, a man who from a Palestinian perspective is clean of corruption, and from an Israeli perspective isn't bloodied by violence. He is often described as a steady, consolidating type of figure, calm and lacking the charisma of Yasser Arafat--perhaps just what is required at such times.

For my part, I believe the participation of militant groups in the elections is a positive thing. As an equality commissioner in Northern Ireland, I learned that this represents engagement with democracy, a step towards the end of participation in violence.

Of course, when one looks at some of the candidates Hamas fielded--including one known as "Hitler" for his hatred of Jews--Israel's stance seems understandable. But it is worth remembering something: one of the worst terrorist atrocities committed in the region, the killing of 91 people at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946, was carried out by a Jewish group called Irgun, and the man who led Irgun, Menachem Begin, went on to become the prime minister of Israel who made peace with Egypt.

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