

DAWN.COM

Hamas followed a long road to the top

— Published Mar 19, 2006 12:00am

AL QUDS: Hamas win in the January elections in the Palestinian territories was not just the result of a national uprising against the former Fatah government's ineffectiveness, but came on the back of a long history of serving a suffering population. There is no definitive Hamas health and welfare organisation, but charities and medical centres throughout the Palestinian Authority territory have links with Hamas or the Islamic movement, Dr. Allam Jarrar, who is also a member of the steering committee of the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organisations' Network based in Ramallah, told IPS.

"These are legal organisations that are functioning in accordance with the Palestinian Authority." Money raised within communities of well-to-do Palestinians and other Muslims through Zakat is channeled to Al-Zakat foundations and distributed to health and social projects, including schools, orphanages, soup kitchens, medical clinics and sports teams, in the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas also offers jobs from time to time within these service structures, although it does not function like a regular employer such as the government, said Shawan Jabarin, acting director-general of al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights organisation based in Ramallah.

Hamas rose as a social service provider before it became a full-fledged political party in 1987, Hisham Ahmed, professor of political science at Ramallah's Birzeit University and a researcher of Islamist movements, told IPS. Following the 1967 six-day war between Israel and Arab states, the Islamic movement became particularly active in Islamic education in mosques. It branched out into health clinics and kindergartens by the early 1990s when it became clear that the Palestinian Authority, not too focused on grassroots Palestinians, was unable to provide these services.

"Sometimes they are stronger than the government in providing services," said Jabarin of Hamas. To be fair, he said, the Palestinian Authority was wracked by problems such as popular violent uprisings against the Israelis that resulted in checkpoint closures damaging the Palestinian economy. Moreover, he said, the roughly 1 billion dollar annual budget of the Palestinian government was not enough to satisfy such a needy society. It was not uncommon for Palestinians to be unable to get medicine or treatment at state-run hospitals.

Payment for use of Hamas-run charitable and healthcare network varies. Schools and medical centres will ask for money but it will be lower than what is demanded elsewhere, said Jabarin. Distribution of food, and services related to orphans are free. But despite Hamas' extensive work in the social services sector, Palestinians tend not to look at the group simply in this context. Nor, for that matter, do they see Hamas as a band of militants, or even as just a political party.

One of the big reasons behind its widespread strength in the occupied Palestinian territories is that Hamas stands up to the Israelis, Jabarin told IPS. The main issue is they...fight corruption and fight for Palestinian rights." But is Hamas's charitable work all altruistic?

“This is their way and strategy to keep in contact with the people,” said Jabarin. While leaders from other political parties may give speeches at mosques, Hamas chooses health and welfare as primary political vehicles to garner votes, Jabarin said.

Now that Hamas is on the verge of forming a government in the Palestinian Authority, it is widely expected that services it has offered for years will flourish through improved relations with the international Islamic movement and a greater cash influx, particularly from governments in the Muslim world. Hisham Ahmed says Hamas will also widen the scope of its work to serve more people, and not be confined to the support of the Islamic movement or its sympathisers.

Although healthcare, education and food were always available to all Palestinians, he said, it was a “fait accompli” that users of these networks were expected to be Hamas supporters.

The source of funding of Hamas operations has always been a subject of concern, particularly to Israel and the United States. There is no reliable figure for its annual budget. Hamas has widely been accused of bankrolling “terrorist operations”. “The way it goes, it all depends on the designation of the money,” Ahmed said. “If it is not (designated for social services), I think it might be used for violence. I have no idea of the breakdown (of funding) between violence and charity.”

But Ahmed says that to the best of his knowledge, profits earned through providing healthcare and other social services to Palestinians are not funnelled into violent activity.

Regardless of criticism of Hamas’ charitable network, and a perception by some that it is somehow tied to violent activities, the range of social services is bound to be an ongoing fixture of the party’s political platform.—Dawn/IPS News Service