

Hamas victory ends Fatah's longtime rule

SONIA VERMA

Newsday

Published Friday, January 27, 2006

RAMALLAH, West Bank -- The militant Islamist party Hamas scored a stunning victory in Palestinian elections Wednesday, winning the power to form its first government and adding a major obstacle to efforts to revive peace talks with Israel.

Hamas won 76 of 132 seats in the Palestinian parliament, ending the longtime rule of rival Fatah, which finished with just 43 seats, according to a preliminary vote tally released Thursday.

The surprise victory triggered a chain reaction across the West Bank and Gaza Strip: Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia and his Cabinet stepped down. Fatah said it would refuse to govern with Hamas, and the groups' armed factions clashed over which flag would fly over government buildings in Ramallah.

Even before the official results came in, Palestinians had chosen: The flag was Hamas green.

Supporters sang and danced their way through the streets of Gaza City, Nablus and Ramallah, ushering in a new era of Palestinian politics.

But the street celebrations didn't drown out a growing unease beyond Palestinian borders over what the win would mean.

In a televised speech Thursday night, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whose position is unchanged by the vote, said he still supported negotiations with Israel.

"I am committed to implementing the program on which you elected me a year ago," he said. "It is a program based on negotiations and peaceful settlement with Israel."

He suggested that future talks could take place through the Palestine Liberation Organization, bypassing a Hamas-led government.

But acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert dismissed the idea of any future talks, saying Israel refused to negotiate with a Palestinian government stacked with Hamas:

"The state of Israel will not negotiate with a Palestinian administration if even part of it is an armed terrorist organization calling for the destruction of the state of Israel," he said.

The stern words did little to dampen the enthusiasm of Hamas backers happy to shake off the last vestiges of Yasser Arafat's autocratic rule.

"I trust Hamas because it is honest and disciplined," said Walid Khalak, 35, passing out cups of bitter coffee to strangers in the streets of Ramallah. "It can't be any worse than what we've had in the past."

Others were wary of the group's Islamist agenda and feared more conservative laws governing social mores.

"I don't want Hamas coming here and telling me not to drink, or telling my wife how to dress," said Bishara Kaoud, 39, who runs Almonds, a popular bar in Ramallah's city center.

Privately, even some Hamas officials seemed caught off guard by their own success. "The truth is, we never expected to do this well," said one candidate in the West Bank.

Accustomed to operating outside the system, the group is now gearing up for its coming test. It is inheriting a nearly bankrupt political authority and is viewed with suspicion by Western countries that donate aid.

Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar issued an optimistic statement from Gaza:

"We are going to change every aspect, as regards the economy, industry, agriculture, as regards social aid, health administration, education."

But Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Birzeit University, warned that Palestinians will not stand by Hamas if it proves unable to handle governing.

"If Hamas doesn't cater to the demands of the Palestinian people, they will be punished, just as Fatah was punished," he said.