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Victory Ends 40 Years of Political Domination by Arafat's Party

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RAMALLAH, West Bank, Jan. 26 — With discipline and a well-financed campaign to turn out its faithful in constituencies, the radical Islamic party Hamas scored an overwhelming victory in Wednesday's Palestinian legislative elections, taking 76 out of 132 seats, deposing the former ruling party, Fatah, which won only 43.

The preliminary results, announced tonight by the Central Election Committee, were likened by Palestinians to an earthquake or a tsunami, ending more than 40 years of political domination by Fatah, the main political faction built by the late Yasir Arafat. Fatah, along with the Palestinian Authority, is widely viewed by Palestinians as corrupt and ineffective.

The surprising results put Hamas — considered to be a terrorist group by Israel, the United States and the European Union — in charge of the Palestinian political future and brought a to efforts to restart peace talks. They made a mockery of the voter surveys released Wednesday night that indicated that Fatah would have the most seats and could retain control of the Palestinian legislature and the cabinet.

In a televised speech tonight, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, whose position is unaffected by the vote, said he remained committed to negotiations with Israel. He suggested that future talks would be conducted through the Palestine Liberation Organization, which could bypass a Hamas-led government.

"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."

But Israel's acting prime minister, Ehud Olmert, said talks were not possible now. "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 in a statement tonight after a cabinet discussion of the election results.

Even before the results were announced, the Fatah prime minister, Ahmed Qurei, resigned; Mr. Qurei had warned Mr. Abbas against holding these elections. And in a series of clashes here, Hamas supporters raised their green flag over the parliament building. They celebrated throughout Gaza and the West Bank, holding victory marches in major cities. In Nablus, Hamas hung enormous green banners on public buildings and its military arm, the Qassam brigades, marched in uniforms with weapons, but unusually, did not wear masks.

In Ramallah, Ali Abu Shusha, 31, with a bright green Hamas banner on his taxi, exulted in the victory. "Hamas was created by the people and belongs to the people," he said. "I want Hamas to

run the government. It has clean hands, puts the poor before the rich and will resist the occupier."

In Gaza City, however, Kamilia Barghouti, 26, a waitress, said she was in shock. "I'm worried about the way this victory will affect how I can dress in public, and even if it will affect where I can work," she said."

The victory of Hamas represents an enormous test for the Palestinians, for the Western nations that pressed for this election and that provide millions of dollars in aid to the Palestinians, and for the Arab world, which is likely to be shaken by the victory of a militant Islamic party in the symbolic heart of the Muslim world, Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories.

But the results will also be a test for Hamas, which had seemed to want a more gradual entry into politics. The leader of Hamas, Mahmoud Zahar, said proudly in Gaza: "We are going to change every aspect, as regards the economy, industry, agriculture, as regards social aid, health, administration, education." But it will not be an easy transformation, and it will provoke political resistance from a largely secular society.

While Hamas politicians said that they would invite other parties, including Fatah, to join them in a government of national unity, key Fatah members like Jibril Rajoub and Mahmoud Dahlan made it clear that Fatah should not be involved with any part of a government dominated by Hamas and help provide cover for Hamas as it deals with the real problems of governance.

Fatah, they suggested, should go into opposition and let Hamas make its own mistakes and deal as best it could with the facts of Palestinian life and the Israeli occupation. The Fatah Central Committee voted tonight not to join a Hamas-led government.

"My advice to Abu Mazen and to Hamas is to think of serious power-sharing," Mr. Amr said, referring to Mr. Abbas. "A partnership between Fatah and Hamas is necessary," he said. "Hamas is going to be put to the test of being a practitioner and not simply an opposition. Politics will have to be taken into account at the expense of ideology."

Damir Sagolj/Reuters

Supporters of Hamas celebrating the election victory today in Ramallah.

While Mr. Abbas won praise for pressing ahead with these elections, the result is not what he wanted and is bound to weaken his position. He gambled, but with a smashing Hamas victory, he is perceived to have lost and to bear some responsibility for failing to reform Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. Mr. Abbas has said that if he cannot carry out his policies, which include negotiations with Israel, he will quit.

Israelis warned the world not to give in to wishful thinking and presume that Hamas will suddenly alter its goals. Israel and the world did not negotiate with Mr. Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization until it agreed to recognize the state of Israel in the late 1980's and disavow terrorism. Israeli politicians suggested that the process would have to begin all over again with Hamas.

"For Israelis, this is the definitive end of the illusion of a comprehensive peace," said Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at the Shalem Center, a policy research organization in Jerusalem. "There

is no more credible hope of Palestinian moderation. For Israelis, it will only confirm what the last five years of terror have taught them: that the war is not about settlements, but about Israel's right to exist."

The Palestinian Authority as a serious negotiating partner no longer exists for Israel, Mr. Halevi said. "Now the era of the pretend peace process is also over," he said, and Israel will continue to act unilaterally to set its own borders, build the separation barrier between itself and the Palestinians and in time, continue the process of unilateral withdrawal from more West Bank settlements "so long as it can ensure that a Hamas-dominated Palestinian Authority will not use that territory to launch rockets or other attacks on Israel."

"There is now a broad consensus, that Israel will go ahead and build our borders to preserve Israel as a democratic Jewish state," said Ami Ayalon, a former director of Shin Bet now running for a seat with the Labor Party.

The Palestinian Authority constructed by Fatah "no longer exists," he said. "Palestinian society is very confused. When they chose Hamas, it is more because of the corruption and failure of the Palestinian Authority and Fatah than because of religion or terrorism. But they will have to pay the price for their decision."

The Hamas victory also brings the group's support for armed attacks on Israel to the fore. Hamas said it entered politics "to protect the resistance" to Israeli occupation of Muslim land, so it is unlikely to heed Western appeals to disarm and recognize Israel, which Hamas in its charter promised to destroy.

The most successful Hamas candidates like Ahmad Mubarak would say today is that if Israel pulled back to its 1967 boundaries, Hamas would consider "a long-term truce."

Mr. Mubarak, a former Islamic jurist, and other Hamas winners were greeted with Arabic sweets and kisses at Hamas headquarters in an office building here, as bearded men in green sashes and hats bustled about talking urgently on their cellphones.

A Hamas politician from Ramallah, Fadel Saleh, said the group would concentrate "on restoring our Palestinian home and rebuilding Palestinian society," leaving international relations to Mr. Abbas and the Palestine Liberation Organization, which does not include Hamas. But, "we want to remake the P.L.O. too, based on this vote," he said. "Hamas wants cooperation with all Palestinian parties and a national agreement on policy."

Hamas was not surprised by the vote, he insisted. "But it is an earthquake for Israel and for the foreign world, because they don't know what Palestinians want," he said. "We want honest government and an end to the occupation, and we will work so that every weapon in the hand of a Palestinian is a national weapon, directed against the occupation, not used for security chaos." The death of Mr. Arafat took the lid off seething resentments of Fatah and the men he brought back to the Palestinian territories from exile after the 1993 Oslo accords with Israel. Those accords set up the Palestinian Authority, and in the 10 years since the last legislative elections, in which Hamas refused to participate, one-party rule proved to be as corrupting among

Palestinians as anywhere else.

Supporters of Hamas celebrated in Rafah, Gaza Strip, as a big victory seemed to be at hand. "Corrupt authorities who have been in power for a long time are usually thrown out in free elections," said Daoud Kuttab, a Palestinian analyst who teaches at Al Quds University in Jerusalem. "After 40 years, it's almost natural. I hoped Fatah would get away with it, but didn't. That the opposition came from a radical Islamic group is unfortunate, but there was no other serious opposition."

Mr. Kuttab said that those who have preached democracy, from the Bush Administration to the Israeli right, will have to decide if their values trump their interests. "If Hamas respects the rules of the democratic game, we have to let the winners win," he said. "But now Hamas will be in power and find out what it will be like to live in the real world. Hamas will have to face reality, and part of reality means dealing with Israel."

But even this process could take many months or years, he said.

Hamas now will have the power to move against corruption, as it promised, and could begin to open investigations into top Fatah officials. How Fatah will respond to the reality of its loss of power will come clear only in the coming days and weeks.

Hamas is also likely to leave the security forces alone, at least for now. They are almost entirely made up of Fatah loyalists, and they voted by more than 90 percent for Fatah in the early voting. Any Hamas effort to try to take over the security forces would almost certainly lead to clashes.

Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Birzeit University who has written books about Hamas, called the vote "an historic moment in every sense." He said there were scores of reasons to explain the vote, "but the most important factor was not Fatah's split but the causes behind the split, the domination of Fatah by self-serving people who did not keep in touch with the people and ostracized the talented."

But he emphasized that because many Palestinians were angry with Fatah, the domination of internal issues and the complications of the voting system, "these results don't reflect the real size of Fatah and Hamas in the society."

If Mr. Abbas and the world handle the situation intelligently, Mr. Ahmed said, "it could mark the beginning of the end of Hamas as an ideologically pure force and a beginning of a reformed Fatah." But if it is handled badly, he said, "the radicalization of Palestinian society will continue."

In Gaza City, Raif Diab, 60, said that the vote marked "a new day, an historic day for the Palestinian people." Hamas will turn its attention to domestic issues and give Fatah outward responsibility for foreign relations, he suggested, but added: "I do have my fears, however. I worry that although Hamas came to power through the democratic process, they are not entirely democratic in their hearts."

According to the results, the Hamas list won 30 of 66 seats at the national level and 46 of 66 seats in constituencies. It did especially well in Gaza, but polled well throughout the West Bank, too. Fatah won 27 seats on the national level and only 16 in the constituencies. The leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine won three seats while another leftist list, Badil, won two seats. The Independent Palestine list, led by presidential election runner-up Mustafa Barghuti, won two seats, as did the Third Way list of the outgoing finance minister, Salam Fayyad, and Hanan Ashrawi. Four other independents won in constituencies, including Mr. Amr. Among the Fatah casualties was Mr. Rajoub.