

Winds of fortune blowing for Hamas

Strong showing likely in parliament election

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JERUSALEM — With every chance to attract voters in the past year, the Islamic militant group Hamas has made its mark. Now, thanks to growing disarray in Fatah, the ruling Palestinian party, Hamas is poised to make a strong showing in crucial parliamentary elections next month in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

While Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas struggles to control unruly gunmen and political rifts in Fatah, Hamas is projecting unity and discipline, delivering social services that the government has failed to provide and reaping the rewards at the polls.

The political gains by Hamas have unsettled Israeli and American officials and created a dilemma for Abbas, who has committed himself to holding parliamentary elections but is under pressure from some within Fatah to postpone the vote so the party can regroup.

Israel, which along with the United States deems Hamas a terrorist organization, has protested the group's participation in the parliamentary elections. Last week Israel warned that if Hamas is on the ballot, Palestinians in East Jerusalem would not be allowed to vote. But Monday, Israeli officials said the government may reverse that stance.

Since the death last year of Yasser Arafat, who served as a unifying symbol, divisions have deepened in Fatah, culminating in a split on the eve of the latest round of local elections in some major West Bank cities recently.

A group of younger Fatah leaders broke away to form a separate slate for the upcoming parliamentary elections, asserting that they had been ignored in the picking of candidates, many of whom were veteran associates of Arafat.

"Arafat was like a father figure, a symbolic leader of the Palestinian national movement in its entirety, and with his absence many of the grievances underneath came up to the surface," said Hisham Ahmed, a political scientist at Birzeit University in the West Bank.

The rifts in Fatah worked to the benefit of Hamas, which presented a united front and won a sweeping victory in the West Bank vote.

Resentment over corruption in Fatah and the Palestinian Authority has grown among ordinary Palestinians, becoming a key factor in the local elections and in the approaching vote for parliament.

Khalil Shikaki, a Palestinian pollster and analyst, said he found that in the recent local elections, corruption was the No. 1 issue for voters.

"The overwhelming majority in all our exit polls indicated that they were utterly dissatisfied with the performance of the existing city councils, who were appointed by the Palestinian Authority and were essentially Fatah," Shikaki said. "Corruption is the Achilles' heel for Fatah. During the past year Fatah has failed to address this issue, and the fragmentation of the party simply added to the existing problem."

Little progress by Abbas

What's more, Abbas, head of Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, is widely seen as having failed to secure real gains for the Palestinians through attempts at negotiation with Israel, a view that bolsters Hamas' message of resistance.

"The political process has not really produced concrete results regarding the prisoners, the Israeli settlements, the checkpoints, and Hamas has capitalized on Palestinian frustration," Ahmed said.

Abbas has condemned violence against Israel and repeatedly urged negotiations, but Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has ruled out such talks now, arguing that unless the Palestinian Authority disarms and dismantles militant groups, there can be no peace process.

The Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip over the summer was widely seen by Palestinians as a victory for armed resistance, boosting Hamas. Because the pullout was not the result of negotiations, Abbas could not claim it as an achievement.

Hamas took credit for the withdrawal in banners across the streets of Gaza, and the Palestinian Authority responded with billboards celebrating the pullout as a new dawn, but the reality since then has not been so rosy.

The Israeli army and Palestinian militants occasionally trade fire across the border, and progress has been slow on easing travel out of the Gaza Strip. An accord brokered by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last month led to the opening of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, but passage to Israel remains heavily restricted, and the Israelis have delayed the start of bus shuttles between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which according to the agreement were to have begun by Dec. 15.

Critics of Sharon say his failure to talk to Abbas, release more Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails or ease travel restrictions has weakened the Palestinian leader and driven people into the arms of Hamas.

Israeli military strikes in Gaza in response to suicide bombings and rocket attacks have further eroded Abbas' authority and strengthened the militants, according to the critics.