

Middle East Democracy and the Hamas Factor

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There is a degree of surrealism in all of this. Hamas has presented its choice of Prime Minister to President Mahmoud Abbas, as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine says it has agreed in principle to join a Hamas-led government.

In the Arab world, such political transformation (that of Islamists and Socialists working together to create a transparent and democratic Parliament) is only possible in political satire, not as an attainable and healthy political process. But Palestinians – as the Hamas Parliamentary victory sweep and the smooth transition of power have shown – are proving to be quite exceptional in this regard.

It goes without saying that Palestinians, and those who have genuinely supported their democratic insurgency have many reasons to be proud. Evidently, those who used democracy as a decoy to justify their grievous foreign policies or to defend their unwarranted military occupation are now being forced into an unpleasant era of ‘soul searching’ – as proposed by the Financial Times.

Hamas, not knowingly, perhaps, has abruptly deprived Washington of its last card in a Middle East foreign policy game, which was already in tatters. Delivering democracy was – until Hamas’ political rise – Washington’s strongest, albeit murkiest pretext to justify its military presence in the Middle East. Other pretexts also proved to be a sham; weapons of mass destruction and all. Even the war on terror logic was turned upside-down, as post-Saddam Iraq became a terror magnet, a term liberally used by US policy makers.

Nothing was left but the good old democracy pretence, which worked well, until Palestinians cast their vote on that critical day late January. The majority voted for Hamas, not because of its Islamic agenda, but because of its uncompromising anti-corruption platform, its stance on Palestinian rights and the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Those who understand the intricacies of the Arab-Israeli conflict must have also decoded the vote as a strong rejection of the US government’s dubious role in the conflict and in abetting Israel’s defiance of international law. According to the deliberately ambiguous terminology of pro-Israeli fan clubs in Washington, the Palestinian vote reflected an emphatically “anti-American,” stance, a most dishonest title indeed.

Chances are, US foreign policy pundits will carry on with their democracy media parade. However, as we have already seen, the democracy rhetoric will begin to erode, losing its tangible associations and relegating almost exclusively to rosy and indefinable assertions. In short: ‘Think Again: Middle East Democracy’, as an article title in Foreign Policy sums it up. The authors suggested, and rightly so, that the “US wants democracy in the Middle East — to a point.” However, it seems that Palestinians have somehow taken democracy a little too far.

Prior to the Hamas victory, the Middle East democracy train seemed to be chugging along at a calculated speed with fantastic speeches and more or less favourable outcomes, from a US foreign policy perspective. From the well-touted, grand democratic experiments in Iraq, Egypt and to the much less popular, yet equally consequential local or municipal elections in various Gulf states, the status quo – with its pending US interests – seemed well preserved. Even the seemingly containable tremor caused by the Muslim Brotherhood poll results in Egypt failed to bend the Bush administration's will of carrying on tailoring democracy to the Arabs. But then, Hamas' surprising victory changed everything.

There should be no illusions that a Hamas elections victory and its aftermath have not changed the parameters of the raging conflict: Palestinians are still as ever an occupied nation and Israel is still the occupier. Notwithstanding, the Hamas takeover of power underlines – aside from the limitation of military occupation – the lack of sincerity on the part of the US administration and the Israeli government in the former's 'push for democracy' and the latter's boasting about its own being the one and only.

Needless to say, having Hamas in power places both the US and Israel in a terrible conundrum. The Israeli one is obvious: never before has Israel dealt with a Palestinian 'partner' so decisive in its demands and objectives, and so un-receptive to bribery or intimidation. Even at the height of its 'unilateral' jargon, Israel knows well that without a 'moderate' Palestinian leadership, little can be achieved insofar as a state of security for Israel while Palestinian rights and freedoms are shamelessly denied.

But the Bush administration debacle, in my opinion, transcends the geographic boundaries of the Israel-Palestinian conflict to the much more, far-reaching political and strategic setting in the entire Middle East, to its quandary with 'political Islam' and the disgruntled, 'rascal multitudes' – to borrow a Chomsky term – of the Arab and Muslim world; so fractious and so eager to take charge of its own destiny – perhaps through the ballot box.

Indeed, the Bush administration finds itself in a greater political mess than thought possible. Weaseling its way out of its 'commitment' to democracy in the Middle East is easier said than done. Every other pretext to justify US imprudence in terms of foreign policy and unconditional financial and military backing of Israel – no longer the 'only democracy in the Middle East' – have long been exploited if not exhausted altogether. Until an alternative policy is devised – chances are a new US doctrine dealing with unfavorable democracy outcomes in the Middle East is currently being concocted – the US and Israel will resort to every form of bullying, intimidation and pressure to completely sideline the relevance of the new Palestinian government, or to 'oust' Hamas, as a joint plot, one recently leaked by US media. The hope is to discredit, then overthrow a Hamas-led government without having to overhaul its entire democracy 'project', whose demise would be much more consequential than the removal of a movement branded terrorist.

Only time and more media leaked plots will reveal what is to transpire. However, the early signs – that of Israel's intention to starve Palestinians through sanctions, coupled with unequalled enthusiasm among US lawmakers to punish Palestinians for electing Hamas – makes the coming Israeli and US foreign policy course even more predictable. While Israel sees little harm in making Palestinians a 'whole lot thinner' as a result of its economic sanctions policy, the US' rash response in chastising Palestinians will likely scar US credibility, or whatever remains of it.

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