

The Hamas Victory in the Palestinian Elections: Local and Global Perspectives

By Riaz Hassan*

The parliamentary election triumph of Hamas surprised almost everybody, including the Hamas leadership, if the press reported correctly. The Bush Administration is blaming its intelligence services for failing to predict Hamas' victory. Most observers forecast that Fatah would win the elections because of its political dominance in Palestinian affairs. Why, then, did most political observers in the West get it so wrong? This political miscalculation will be the subject of much analysis and commentary in the coming months.

A number of specific local issues delivered Hamas its historic electoral victory. Credit must go to the Palestinian people, who turned out to be astute voters. A significant number of Palestinians were simply unable to accept the corruption and cronyism that allegedly flourished under the Palestinian Authority led by Fatah. While most Palestinians remember well and admire the sacrifices made by Fatah leaders in the past, they were simply deterred by their inability to institute political and economic reforms to better the lives of ordinary people. Hamas had a much better reading of the Palestinian political pulse. It was not difficult for Hamas to do so: Hamas delivers health, educational and social services to large numbers of Palestinians, making daily life bearable.

Unlike Fatah, which had several candidates contesting the same constituency, resulting in a splitting of Fatah's votes, Hamas ran an extremely disciplined political campaign. Hamas also made use of its female supporters, sending them door-to-door to canvass voters and to polling stations to campaign for Hamas' candidates. These election strategies obviously worked in Hamas' favor. Hamas has also amassed political capital through its resistance and military campaigns against the Israeli occupation. It was these actions which led to Hamas' being labelled and treated as a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union and several other western countries. In a political environment in which ordinary Palestinians feel completely powerless, Hamas' acts of resistance and tough rhetoric gave Palestinians a sense of empowerment that may well be the reason for its electoral victory over its opponents.

In deeply religious Palestinian Muslim society, Hamas' Islamic religious credentials must have made it more appealing to many voters than its secular opponent. Moreover, the impact of Islamic credentials on voters is not confined to Palestine alone: evidence from a number of Muslim countries shows that over the past three years Muslim political parties have been performing well in elections. In December 2005, Egyptian voters were so apathetic that only 25 percent of the registered voters actually cast their ballots. However, this small number of voters delivered 20 percent of their votes and 20 percent of the seats in the Egyptian parliament to the banned Muslim Brotherhood, although it was not even officially participating in the elections and most of its candidates ran as 'independents.' Surprisingly, in the November 2000 parliamentary elections candidates from the Muslim Brotherhood, running as 'independents,' received only four percent of the votes. In the Iranian elections last year, the voters chose a 'hardliner' presidential candidate, preferring him over a moderate candidate and former president. Similarly, the election result in Iran was the opposite of that delivered in the previous presidential election.

In ideologically-secular Turkey, the Islamic Party the "AKP," for the first time in the history of the modern Turkish Republic, became the ruling political party in its own right. In 2002, the AKP won 34 percent of the votes, as compared to 18 percent of the votes in the parliamentary

* The author is Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow and Emeritus Professor, Department of Sociology, Flinders University, Australia; Visiting Professor, Yale University, Spring 2006. He is the author of: *Faithlines: Muslim Conceptions of Islam and Society*, Oxford University Press: 2003.

elections in 1999. In the Indonesian parliamentary elections, the secular nationalist parties' share of the votes declined from 56 percent in 1999 to 40 percent in 2004; in general, support for the 'Islamic parties' increased.

In the Pakistani parliamentary elections of 2002, the coalition of Islamic parties led by Jamaat-e-Islami won an unprecedented 59 parliamentary seats and over 11 percent of the votes, almost treble the number of seats and votes it won in the 1997 elections. Indeed, in the North West Frontier and Baluchistan Provinces – the two Pakistani provinces that border Afghanistan – the Islamic parties won the majority of the seats in the provincial legislative assemblies. The "War on Terror" had its greatest direct impact in these two provinces, as many of the Taliban are Pushtoons with close links with their fellow Pushtoons in Pakistan.

Why have Islamic parties been so successful in winning the support of voters in various Muslim countries during the last three years as compared with their electoral performances prior to 2001? I have just concluded a study of Muslim religiosity in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt and Kazakhstan. Findings from this study and recent public opinion polls provide a possible answer.

Across all sections of Muslim societies, the research showed that there is a widespread perception that the "War on Terror" is a war against Islam and Islamic/Arab cultures, which Islamic parties are exploiting. This pervasive perception, coupled with the banning of a number of Islamic organizations as terrorist organizations and the measures adopted by many pro-Western governments in countries such as Pakistan and Egypt in order to oppress their political opponents, have boosted the political fortunes of Islamic parties. The Islamic parties' more nuanced stance towards the relationship between terrorism and Muslims in the "War on Terror" has also made them more appealing to the Muslim electorate than before September 11th and the Bush Administration's institution of the "War on Terror." Many Muslim voters may also be voting for Islamic parties as a symbolic gesture to assert pride in their faith and culture, rather than for other factors, such as their economic agendas or their ability to solve pressing socio-economic problems. Thus, from this global perspective, Hamas' victory is not so surprising after all.