

At Last, A Real Middle East Democracy Project

By [Ramzy Baroud](#)

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The spectacular Hamas victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of January 25 has given rise to a new era of politics in Palestine, the Middle East and in the Arab and Muslim world as a whole.

The implications of Hamas's sweeping win in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza cannot be limited to the geopolitical boundaries of the Occupied Territories. Indeed, it goes beyond such borders to include a region trapped in an outdated political process, neither meaningful, nor equitable.

But in the eyes of the West, the Middle East is not the Ukraine, and its popular revolutions – even through the ballot box – are by no means a cause for celebration. To the contrary, Hamas's democratic triumph will most likely challenge the West's grand plans for the Middle East and might in fact torpedo the once touted US Middle East democracy project.

I have argued for years that the US push for democracy was intended mostly for an American audience, disillusioned with their government's utter failure in affecting any serious change in the Middle East political map, as they were once promised. The military setbacks in Iraq – which are fated to culminate into decisive military defeat and eventual withdrawal – have driven President Bush to seek alternative achievements that can be attributed to his supposedly foresighted policies.

To bolster rhetoric, some action, even if symbolic was needed. This well explains the exaggerated enthusiasm displayed by the Bush administration – and its allies among media pundits – over the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon and the Egyptian and Iraqi elections. In all of these events, the outcome seemed indicative of a seemingly true popular and democratic process, yet harmless enough to ensure that US interests and policies in the region would be as safely guarded as ever.

Then comes Hamas's decision to take part in the second ever-Palestinian parliamentary elections. As the prospect of Hamas's strong showing or even victory loomed, the Bush administration seemed little interested in ensuring that the rules of a real democracy be preserved. Double-dealing, intimidation and outright threats quickly replaced the rosy promises once passionately delivered. News reports spoke of last minute US funding geared toward boosting Hamas's formidable opponent, Fatah's, ratings among Palestinians, who were obviously fed up with the Israeli occupation, the U.S.'s dishonest role as a "peacemaker," and the indefensible corruption of the Palestinian Authority.

Palestinian voters made their choice, decidedly choosing Hamas, whose social services and corruption-free history placed its performance at the polls above and beyond all expectations. All eyes were on Washington as the election results came out. European Union

members were careful not to validate the victory of a “terrorist” group, and the Arab front was suspiciously hushed. Worried not to fundamentally expose her government’s democracy farce, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, among other US officials, attempted to articulate a response that both approves of Palestinian democracy, yet objects to its outcome.

An international campaign — led by Washington, and Rice in particular — was promptly devised to counterbalance one of the most democratic elections ever experienced in the Arab world, resorting to arm twisting over aid and out-and-out political blackmail. One has to only consider UN reports of the extreme poverty and alarming rate of malnourished children in the Occupied Territories to appreciate how appalling the Bush administration and its Western allies’ threats are regarding their future funding of the PA.

The tirelessly uttered argument by Washington and almost every European capital is that no donor money should flow to a government led by a group that doesn’t acknowledge Israel’s existence and is “dedicated to Israel’s destruction.” But how can a nation unconditionally recognize its own occupier, who adamantly refuses to honor scores of United Nations resolutions and deems international law neither binding nor relevant? Wouldn’t be odd for a Hamas-led government to declare its commitment to peace on the same day that top Israeli officials declare that elected Palestinian ministers are not immune to assassination?

Of course any reasonable American or European assessment of Hamas as a maturing political and social movement, would realize a pragmatic trend that can hardly be matched by Israel itself. Hamas’s commitment to the ceasefire, for example, for nearly a year has been exemplary by any definition, if compared with Israel’s daily violations. Even while Palestinian ballots were being counted, Israeli troops shot dead a nine-year-old girl, Eya al-Astal in Gaza for no apparent reason.

From Washington’s point of view, the burden is still on the Palestinians – to legitimize the same entity that has illegitimately expropriated their land – despite the remarkable strides they’ve made under the most extreme circumstances.

While many Palestinians still oppose some of Hamas’s past methods — the reprehensible targeting of Israeli civilians — many still see the movement as the antithesis to the ills of the Oslo Accord: its dreadful stagnation and countless failures. However, it is rather remarkable that years of collective punishment and the persistent language of threats and intimidation simultaneously pouring from Tel Aviv and Washington were of no avail as Palestinians voted for reforms and for a political platform that is based on national unity, not exclusion.

Moreover, though the Hamas victory will possibly mark the end of the US Middle East democracy project charade, it should strongly enhance the chances of regionally fostered democratic initiatives, ones that reflect the peoples’ own needs and interests, not those of the beleaguered Bush administration.

Despite the uncertainty that the future still carries, the many tricks of coercion and pressure that Israel and the US will likely pull, the hypocritical EU stance, and the terrible political inertness and indecision of the Arabs, one can only hope that true democracy will deliver what empty rhetoric has not — not only in Palestine, but throughout the region.

Ramzy Baroud teaches mass communication at Curtin University of Technology, and is the

author of the forthcoming book "The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle." (Pluto Press, London) He is also the editor-in-chief of PalestineChronicle.com

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