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Abbas has a mandate; now he needs allies

By Herbert C. Kelman | January 11, 2005

THE DECISIVE victory of Mahmoud Abbas in the Palestinian elections creates a new opportunity for resuming Israeli-Palestinian negotiations toward a mutually beneficial two-state solution. The fact that Fatah, the mainstream Palestinian party, united in support of Abbas's candidacy and that he won the election with an overwhelming majority gives him the legitimacy that he lacked during his earlier brief term as prime minister and a mandate to enter into peace negotiations.

The opportunity created by the outcome of the Palestinian elections will almost certainly be lost, however, unless the Israeli government and relevant third parties -- particularly the US government -- are able to respond to it actively and creatively. To do so, in turn, requires an understanding of the meaning of Abbas's victory and the nature of the mandate it has given him.

To begin with, the outcome of the vote must be understood as a demonstration of the political maturity of the Palestinian electorate and its eagerness to end the violence and return to the negotiating table. Even though Abbas is not a charismatic leader and has only a limited popular base, a large majority voted for him because they see him as most capable of reviving the negotiating process and undertaking internal reforms.

Abbas has been clear in his rejection of violence as a means of achieving Palestinian national goals. But his goals are the same as those that have been proclaimed by Arafat and the Fatah leadership: establishment of an independent, viable Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza alongside and in peaceful coexistence with Israel; borders along the 1967 lines, with negotiated minor adjustments based on a 1:1 exchange of territories; Jerusalem as a shared city containing the capitals of both states; and a resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem that addresses the human needs and sense of justice of the refugee population without undermining the character of Israel as a majority-Jewish state. Abbas cannot accept less than that without losing the legitimacy the election has conferred on him and the mandate to negotiate a peaceful solution.

The Israeli and US response to the Palestinian elections must meet several requirements if the opportunities presented by Abbas's strong showing are to fulfill their promise.

First, negotiation of a final peace agreement must be resumed rapidly. Abbas's legitimacy would be undermined if negotiations were postponed until after the disengagement planned by Israel's prime minister, Ariel Sharon. Moreover, resumption of negotiations must not be based on conditions that Abbas cannot possibly meet in the short term, among them a total cessation of Palestinian acts of violence or a major overhaul of Palestinian institutions. Such conditions would hand veto power to those elements on both sides that seek to block peace negotiations.

Second, negotiations at this stage need to begin with a commitment by both sides to the end point that these negotiations are designed to achieve.

The general outline of an agreement based on a historic compromise in terms of a two-state solution are well known. What has been lost in recent years is the mutual trust required to work out the details.

Restoring this trust by committing to the end point will strengthen the majorities in the two populations that favor a negotiated agreement but do not believe they have a partner on the other side.

Third, Israel and the United States must avoid any implication that Abbas is "their man," replacing the unacceptable Arafat. Such an image can only undermine Abbas's legitimacy among Palestinians. The fact is that he was chosen by Palestinians as Arafat's successor. A major source of his legitimacy, in fact, is his close, longtime association with Arafat. Moreover, it was Arafat more than anyone else who promoted the idea

of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel and helped legitimate it, although in the end his tactics presented an obstacle to negotiations. Abbas's election has give him legitimacy to pursue these negotiation goals but to do so by more constructive means.

Finally, Israel -- with strong urging by the United States -- must take steps on the ground that would strengthen Abbas's legitimacy by demonstrating that he is able to achieve both visible improvements in Palestinians' daily lives and movement toward ending the occupation. Such steps would include release of Palestinian political prisoners, an increase in Palestinian freedom of movement, a decrease in various forms of violence toward Palestinian people and property, and a halt in the settlement process.

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