

What now?

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"Today I voted for Abu Mazen because he's Israel's friend and maybe he would be able to remove the checkpoints and the separation wall and improve the economy. The Israelis and Americans like him very much, so there's hope. We want to live a normal life, like all human beings, because we are tired. We want to give peace a second chance."

This is how Adnan Abu Sneineh, 36, a high school teacher from east Jerusalem, replied when asked outside a polling station why he had voted for Fatah candidate Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) in last Sunday's election for the chairmanship of the Palestinian Authority.

Abu Sneineh's explanation was not uncommon throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as Palestinians celebrated what they termed a "festival of democracy" on the day of the election. Most people interviewed before and after casting their ballots said they chose Abbas because he was their only hope for a brighter future.

The Palestinians have already confounded cynics by embarking on a relatively smooth transition of power immediately after Yasser Arafat's death and later holding the Arab world's first free presidential election.

"Today the Arabs are jealous of us," boasted Palestinian political analyst Hasan al-Batal.

After four years of fighting, which have resulted in thousands of casualties and the destruction of the economy and infrastructure, a steadily increasing number of Palestinians are now convinced that the time has finally arrived for real changes. Moreover, a growing number of people in Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin seem to be searching for a ladder on which to climb down from the high tree where Arafat left them. In other words, they are seeking a face-saving solution that will prevent their cause from sinking in the quagmire.

Abbas promised during the election campaign to follow in Arafat's footsteps, but those who know him say they nearly fell off their chairs when they heard him talk so highly of his predecessor.

It's no secret that Abbas and Arafat were at loggerheads for many years. The dispute between the two peaked in 2003, when Arafat, under pressure from the US and various European countries, reluctantly agreed to appoint Abbas the first prime minister of the Palestinian Authority.

Four months after he took over as prime minister, Abbas decided he had had enough and sent an angry letter of resignation to Arafat via a messenger.

"I'm fed up with this man," a bitter Abbas told a close aide, referring to Arafat's recurring attempts to undermine his power. "I swear I will never work with him [Arafat] again."

To his credit, it's worth mentioning that Abbas, who had found himself engaged in an ugly and humiliating power struggle with Arafat, stubbornly insisted on keeping his promise. From the time he stepped down, he refused to meet with Arafat, not even when the latter publicly begged for a sulha (reconciliation) with the estranged Abbas in his last speech before the Palestinian legislature in August 2004.

Although he lives only a short distance away from the Mukata "presidential" compound in Ramallah, Abbas boycotted all PLO, Fatah and cabinet meetings that were chaired by Arafat. The only time he was seen inside the compound was in late October, when Arafat became very sick and was about to be flown to Paris for medical treatment. Some officials in Ramallah doubt that Arafat, who was dazed and extremely weak, even recognized Abbas as he stood near his bed.

"I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that Abu Mazen actually despised Arafat for many years," said a veteran Fatah official. "For many years, Arafat regarded Abu Mazen as a threat to his leadership and did almost everything he could to block him."

The official added that he and many of his friends "laughed wildly" each time they heard Abbas, during the election campaign, pay tribute to Arafat's legacy.

"He was the Number One opposition figure to Arafat," he pointed out, adding that Abbas had never admired Arafat's autocratic methods.

YET WHILE many Palestinians said this week that they voted for Abbas "because he had promised to follow in the footsteps of Arafat," they added in the same breath that they were hoping for real changes, first and foremost an end to widespread financial corruption and nepotism. Real changes, as many residents of Ramallah and other Palestinian communities explained, also mean an end to the state of anarchy and lawlessness that thrived under Arafat's administration.

"Abu Mazen's overwhelming victory means that he has received a popular mandate to implement large-scale reforms and create democratic institutions," said political commentator Rajab Abu Sirriyeh. "The election should be seen as a turning point towards reorganizing the Palestinian home and democratizing our society."

Other analysts argue that Abbas would not have won the election had he distanced himself from Arafat.

"You must understand that Arafat was not only a leader, but a national symbol as well," explained one. "The Palestinians may have hated Arafat's style of ruling, but they worshipped him as an icon. He was a larger-than-life figure and even those who disagreed with him had to invoke his name during the election campaign. It would have been foolish of Abu Mazen to ignore Arafat or say the wrong thing about him, particularly when the people remain in a state of trauma following their leader's death."

A Ramallah woman who worked for six years with Abbas said there was a "huge difference" between her former boss and Arafat.

"Abu Mazen is a very serious man who believes in democracy and freedom," she added. "He was never happy with the way Arafat and his top aides were handling the affairs of the people. He always said that Arafat's policies will lead the people towards more disasters, and I think he was right."

Like many Palestinians, the 38-year-old woman who returned to the West Bank after spending the last 30 years of her life moving from one Arab country to another, voiced hope that Abbas and the new leadership would be able to repair the damage done over the past four years.

"There's a lot of hope, and expectations are very high among Palestinians," she said. "But the problem is that our people have become accustomed to chaos and lawlessness. They just can't stand the idea of someone ruling them and trying to enforce law and order. Arafat never did anything to stop this. On the contrary, he encouraged the state of chaos and seemed to enjoy every minute of it. This was his way of ruling.

"Abu Mazen, by contrast, has a different approach. He wants to build a state of law and order, where every citizen has the right to express his opinion freely and without being intimidated. I know it's not going to be easy, but at least we are beginning to move on the right path."

ABBAS'S PROMISE to "reorganize" the Palestinian home by implementing major reforms in all fields did not fall on deaf ears.

In fact, the other six candidates who ran in the election all placed the issues of corruption and democracy at the top of their platforms. Public opinion polls published in the West Bank and Gaza Strip over the past few months have shown that the majority of the people are "thirsty" for democracy and transparency.

During his brief tenure as prime minister, Abbas and some of his allies, such as former information minister Nabil Amr, waged a campaign to put an end to financial corruption among the top brass of the Palestinian leadership and the rule of armed thugs on the streets, but to no avail. The two, along with Gaza warlord Muhammad Dahlan, were accused by Arafat's inner circle of being part of an "American-Israeli conspiracy" to topple the elected leader of the Palestinian people.

Now both Dahlan and Amr, together with several reformists and anti-corruption officials, appear determined to give Abbas a hand in fulfilling his promise to build "a state of law and institutions." The two are widely expected to play key roles in the post-Arafat era - a move that is likely to come at the expense of scores of Arafat loyalists and cronies who continue to haunt the Mukata more than 60 days after the death of their mentor.

ABBAS WILL spend the first few weeks in power trying to persuade Hamas and other armed groups to accept a hudna (temporary truce) with Israel, say aides. He is hoping that the Egyptians will help him in this mission by hosting a conference in Cairo for all the Palestinian factions.

Hamas, which boycotted the election, seems to be divided on the issue of the hudna. The movement's leaders in Syria and Lebanon are strongly opposed to any form of cease-fire, while its representatives in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, who have been forced to go underground for fear of being targeted by Israel, appear to have softened their position.

But Hamas is not the only group whose leaders are divided over the hudna proposal.

Gunmen belonging to Abbas's Fatah faction, Aksa Martyrs Brigades, have been releasing contradictory statements over the past few weeks as to their willingness to stop terrorist attacks against Israel.

The gunmen threw their full weight behind Abbas, granting him a hero's welcome and warmly embracing him during his election tour of Jenin, Nablus and Rafah. Fatah activists say the main reason the gunmen decided to back Abbas's candidacy was his promise to solve their plight and resume financial aid (the PA reportedly stopped paying salaries to the gunmen more than a year ago, following protests from the US and Israel).

But while some of the militiamen have said they would lay down their weapons if asked by Abbas, others have vowed to pursue the fight against Israel "until it agrees to pull back to the pre-1967 borders, release all prisoners, return all refugees to their original homes and dismantle all settlements."

Abbas's plan calls for incorporating these disgruntled men into the revamped security forces, with the hope of ending their plight as fugitives. Nonetheless, not all of them are prepared to accept the idea, as evidenced by interviews some have given to the Arab media over the past few weeks.

Abbas's message to the Palestinians is as follows: Now that the armed struggle has failed, it's time to start collecting the pieces and return to the negotiating table because we are likely to achieve more by talking than shooting.

His message has won the backing of a majority of Palestinians whose lives have been virtually devastated by the fighting. But will he be able to deliver?

"Yes," shoots a senior Abbas aide. "He has a clear mandate to stop Kassam rockets, suicide bombings and other activities that cause more harm to the Palestinians than to Israel. The people have to understand that Abu Mazen is determined to put an end to security chaos."

Does this mean that Abu Mazen will order the security forces to confiscate the weapons of Hamas and Fatah militiamen?

"We will confiscate weapons from anyone who acts in violation of our national interests," the aide replied, refusing to elaborate.

VOTERS WHO cast their ballots for Abbas on Sunday offered different explanations as to why they chose him. Refugees said it was because he had promised to solve their problem on the basis of United Nations resolution 194, while relatives of prisoners said they voted for him because he alone would be able to convince Israel to release their sons.

The vast majority of the voters who arrived at the polling stations said they wanted Abbas to rebuild the economy and persuade Israel to ease security restrictions, especially with regard to the freedom of movement.

One voter, a 65-year-old farmer from a village outside Nablus, said he voted for Abbas "because people told me he would be able to remove the separation wall which swallowed our lands."

Summing up the mood of optimism that has engulfed the Palestinians in the aftermath of Arafat's death and the election of Abbas, Talal Okal, a prominent columnist, wrote this week: "This is the beginning of a new era. The Palestinians have proven to the world that they are capable of practicing democracy. Every day we will remember the hundreds of promises that the new president made during his election campaign. But we know that he doesn't carry a magic stick and that he needs a lot

of time to fulfill some of the promises. However, for now we will judge him by his style and credibility."

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