

Extreme victory

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KEVIN PERAINO

THE polls had barely closed before friends of the henna-bearded Muhammad Abu Tir, 55, began talking him up to be the Palestinian Authority's next interior minister. "I think I'd be good at it," he told Newsweek at his East Jerusalem home. "I'm qualified." Abu Tir -- the victorious Hamas's second-ranked candidate in last week's parliamentary elections and a longtime leader in the militant Islamist group's armed wing -- has plenty of firsthand experience with law enforcement. He's spent most of his adult life in Israeli prisons. But on further reflection, he said he might do better to keep "a low profile" in the new government. The more he thought about it, the less he seemed to like the idea of Hamas's putting anyone in jail. At last he declared flatly: "We will not act as policemen."

That could be a big problem, both for the Palestinian people and for the world. The most desperate need these days in the Palestinian territories is law and order. There's no use talking peace with someone who has no power to deliver it. The territories' lawlessness was driven home by post-election gun battles between Hamas supporters and the biggest losers, the formerly ruling Fatah party. The Palestinian Authority is a failed state in the making, a vast slum festering with crime and corruption. That was the issue that brought a commanding majority victory to Hamas, with a tally of 74 parliamentary seats out of 132, versus Fatah's 45. Talking to Newsweek on the eve of the vote, Hamas co-founder Mahmoud Zahar vowed, "The people will be rid of the disgusting situation they live in -- the corruption within the weak and ineffective PA that can't even bring itself to arrest drug addicts, let alone other criminals."

Despite those lofty aims, the Hamas landslide poses a bedrock dilemma for US policymakers. The most upbeat spin came from George W. Bush himself. "The people are demanding honest government," the president said. "The people want services. They want to be able to raise their children in an environment in which they can get a decent education and they can find health care. And so the elections should open the eyes of the old guard there in the Palestinian territories ... That's the

great thing about democracy, it provides a look into society." There's one trouble: the Hamas charter explicitly calls for Israel's destruction, and the US government lists the party as a terrorist organization. "I have made it very clear," Bush told one persistent reporter. "A political party that articulates the destruction of Israel as part of its platform is a party with which we will not deal."

The main task for Hamas leaders now is to avoid making life even harder for the people who elected them. With outside support, they might succeed at cleaning up at least some of the rot the Palestinian people have inherited from Yasir Arafat and his Fatah party. They will not likely get much support, though. Israel controls most of the borders to the Palestinian territories, and it will not just forget about years of Hamas suicide bombings and other attacks. Other foreign powers provide the donor funds that keep the Palestinian Authority afloat. Even the threadbare public services the PA now provides would be impossible without an estimated \$30 million a month in international assistance, mainly from the United States and Europe.

The US government has budgeted \$150 million in assistance for fiscal 2006 and contributed an additional \$84 million through the United Nations. For the moment, ongoing projects like USAID's water-treatment facilities are likely to go forward -- at least until the new government is formed. Meanwhile, US officials are trying to sort out the legal repercussions of a government run by a terrorist organization, and whether a Hamas-led PA could receive anything at all under a US law requiring that recipients sign an "anti-terrorism certification." Bush has said there will be no aid unless Hamas accepts Israel and renounces terrorism. "If they don't, we won't deal with them. Aid packages won't go forward," he warned. "We won't be providing help to a government that wants to destroy our ally and friend." Yet Washington will also have to weigh the possibility that the Palestinians will turn to America's enemies -- like Iran -- for funding.

Late last week, Newsweek talked to former PA Finance minister Salam Fayyad about the territories' impending budget crisis. (He denied rumors that he had been approached to take the prime

minister's post.) According to the Texas-educated Fayyad, who once worked for the International Monetary Fund and is respected by the international community, the PA has been borrowing roughly \$20 million every month to meet monthly expenses and salaries of roughly \$150 million. "And this is not comfortable living," he says of the latter figure. "This is barely making it." Now, he says, "we're at the limit of how much we can borrow. Banks won't lend any more." Approximately 30,000 government workers could lose their jobs to make up the difference.

Still, Hamas's biggest economic worry is right next door. Israel can close the borders at will, blocking commercial traffic and making the daily commute impossible for the thousands of Palestinians who earn their living inside Israel. Even in "normal" times, the jobless rate in the territories is roughly 20 percent, and per capita income is about \$1,100 a year. The Israeli government also controls the collection of all customs duties in the territories, enabling it to shut off the PA's primary source of revenue, amounting to roughly \$700 million a year, according to Fayyad.

Israel's leaders made little effort to hide their attempts to sabotage Hamas before the elections. Israeli troops swept through the West Bank, arresting many of the party's top politicians, including Abu Tir. He was freed a day later, but other Hamas campaigners remain behind bars. A senior Israeli security source, requesting anonymity because of the sensitive nature of his job, says the goal was to disrupt the Hamas candidates' day-to-day operations, even though Israeli strategists knew the sweeps would cause a backlash.

The planners were right about the backlash, anyway. At a campaign rally last week in the West Bank town of Abu Dis, a campaign worker used a mobile phone to call Ibrahim Abu Salem, 58, a Hamas leader who has been jailed since last fall. When Abu Salem answered, the campaign worker put his voice on the rally's sound system, allowing the jailed leader to speak directly to his supporters from prison. The crowd went wild.

Israel's policymakers disagreed sharply over whether to force a postponement of the elections, according to the Israeli security



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source. Some thought a delay could buy time for rival Palestinian candidates and Western diplomats to exploit potential splits in Hamas, while others worried that stalling would only strengthen the Islamists' support. Silvan Shalom, Israel's Foreign Minister at the time, told Newsweek that he warned acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert the day after Ariel Sharon's stroke not to let the elections take place. He says Olmert barely replied. According to Shalom, U.S. diplomats were pressing the interim leader to allow the elections to proceed. "I think he didn't want a confrontation with the American administration in his first decision [in office]," says Shalom. "And so he gave up."

Even with so much unpleasant history, some Hamas leaders have nevertheless hinted that the party might be willing to tone down its death-to-Israel plank -- but not without big concessions in return. Hamas has generally honored a yearlong truce with Israel, and senior members have suggested that it could be extended indefinitely. Opinion polls say most Palestinians -- even among those who voted for Hamas -- want a decent peace deal, not endless conflict. Asked about the possibility of future talks with Israel, party co-founder Zahar does not rule it out. "The previous experience is bad," he says. "We did not benefit at all. However, if another attempt is made and it is successful, this situation will lessen the embarrassment for all sides." In a poll published by Yediot Achronot newspaper, an astounding 48 percent of Israelis actually favoured talks with Hamas.

The radicals are learning how to massage their message. Nashat Aqtash, a communications professor at Birzeit University in the West Bank, has been tutoring Hamas candidates on the language of modern politics. He says he learned one of his most valuable lessons from watching Bush's spin doctors: replace hot-button words with polite equivalents. "We don't need to 'kill people'," he says. "We

need to 'remove occupation.' Both are the same, but the meaning is totally different." And aim your pitch to attract swing voters. "People tackling social issues get higher votes," he says. "When you kill, don't say you're going to do it. Just do it. And then say you're sorry."

Few Israeli politicians can dare to speak of talks with Hamas until after March 28, when Israel will hold its own parliamentary elections. For followers of Sharon's moderate Kadima Party, the rise of Hamas just proves that negotiations are futile, and unilateral withdrawal is Israel's only option. Kadima's opponents see things differently. "People now understand that any territory we vacate will be used against us," Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu told Newsweek late last week. "Sometimes reality has to punch people in the face before they change their opinion."

Hamas has hardly begun to feel the reality of governing the territories. Daniel Kurtzer, a former US ambassador to Israel, warns that further public pressure on the group is likely to do more harm than good. "I would advise us to avoid becoming the problem," he says. "The problem is in the Palestinians' laps. Let them deal with it."

Some Palestinians claim they actually look forward to the challenge. "When you push for democracy you cannot tailor the outcome to your own liking," says Ziad Abu Amr, an independent Gaza politician who often helps mediate differences between Fatah and Hamas. "Today, people may elect Islamists, and in four years they may change their mind. They will learn what works and what doesn't." All sides are grinding for a long, hard, messy process. But if President Bush and the leaders of Hamas can agree on anything, it's that nothing else works better.

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With Dan Ephron and Joanna Chen in Jerusalem and Michael Hirsch and Richard Wolfe in Washington.

On Holocaust exploiters, deniers, and heroes

MAS'OOD CAJEE

SIX decades since the slaughter of World War II and the Nazi holocaust, we hear extremist voices alternately exploiting or denying the Holocaust for political gain. By warping our memory of the Shoah (the Hebrew word for the Holocaust), both exploiters and deniers miss the stark, vital message of the Holocaust and its heroes whose they displayed uncommon moral courage in the face of evil.

Holocaust exploiters

A growing chorus of voices which exploits the Holocaust for political gain has been trying to smear Muslims and Arabs in particular with grand accusations of complicity in the Holocaust and support for the Nazis. These voices serve hawkish interests in Israel and the United States who wish to justify and legitimize continued war, violence, and yes even genocide against Muslims and Arabs. Identifying Muslims with and as Nazis eases the task of selling continued bloodshed to war-weary publics. Reading the books and op-eds of the smearers, one could almost conclude absurdly that the Nazi holocaust was an Arab Muslim and not a European Christian project. As evidence, the smearers usually trot out the pro-German Mufti of Jerusalem Amin Al-Husayni and the Bosnian Muslim SS "Handschar" division.

What these smearing Islamophobes don't like to tell you: the "Mufti" was actually an appointee of the Jewish administrator of British Palestine who completed one measly year at Al-Azhar and betrayed the Ottoman Sultan to join the British. The much-vaunted "Handschar" SS division disbanded after a few months due to mass desertions was the only SS division ever to mutiny. Because they are allied to the power establishments in Israel and the United States, the Holocaust exploiters generally keep mum about American, Jewish, and Zionist complicity in the Holocaust. They aren't currently touching the cruel, forced 1939 return from Miami of the Jewish refugee ship SS St. Louis to Nazi Europe. Or that elites in the Anglo-American sphere widely admired Adolf Hitler throughout the 1930s. George Bush's hero Winston Churchill first condemned Hitler only five years after he came to power. Or that elements of the Jewish and Zionist leadership collaborated with the Nazis as documented by Hannah Arendt and other Jewish historians (who called their actions "the darkest chapter of the whole dark story"). Or that today, Israel ironically dangles the spectre of Holocaust in its Nuclear avatar over the mostly Muslim peoples of the Middle East.

Holocaust deniers

On the other side, too many Muslim and Arab intellectuals and leaders continue to fail in adequately addressing the Nazi holocaust and its implications for today in meaningful, humanitarian terms. Two recent examples include the Muslim Council of Britain's daft refusal to participate in Britain's annual Holocaust Memorial Day and the public indulgence in Holocaust revisionism and labeling of the Nazi holocaust as "myth" by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood chief Muhammad Akef. Deep-seated, knee-jerk anti-Zionism and the continuing occupation of Palestine have unfortunately blinded many Arabs and Muslims to the historical reality and legacy of the Nazi holocaust.

An intelligent and compassionate regard for the victims of the Nazi holocaust, Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, the disabled, and others of the part of contemporary Muslims is critical for preserving ethical and communal integrity, for a just resolution of the Palestinian question and for the future. There is to be one Western Muslim. Instead, the Holocaust remains a historical blindspot in Arab and Muslim

discourse, and as a result it has become a potent political weapon to be exploited at will by those who view Palestinians and Muslims as enemies.

Holocaust heroes

In their perversion of memory, Holocaust deniers and exploiters share another moral ugliness. Both insult the memory of the countless Muslims who risked or gave their lives to rescue Jews threatened with extermination by the Nazis. The stories of the Muslim rescuers of Jews are largely unknown and unpublicized. Only in the past fifteen years have Holocaust researchers brought a few to the public's attention. Several Muslims (whose stories of heroism and courage we know) have since been honoured by Yad Vashem and other Holocaust memorial groups as Righteous Gentiles. They include: the Bosnian Dervis Korkut, who harboured a young Jewish woman resistance fighter named Mira Papo and saved the Sarajevo Haggadah, one of the most valuable Hebrew manuscripts in the world; the Turk Selahattin Ulkumen, whose rescue of fifty Jews from the ovens of Auschwitz led to the death of his wife Mihinissa soon after she gave birth to their son Mehmet when the Nazis retaliated for his heroism; the Albanian Refik Vesili who as a 16-year-old saved eight Jews by hiding them in his family's mountain home.

Most Holocaust historians would agree that Muslim Europe (Albania, Bosnia, and Turkey) responded courageously and righteously especially in comparison to Christian Europe. While there were Muslims who collaborated with the Nazis, they were the exception and certainly not the rule. In addition, in North Africa the Sultan of Morocco, the Bey of Tunis, and the Ulema of Algeria all lent support to their beleaguered Jewish countrymen.

Continental Europe's only independent Muslim country, Albania, was also the only European country to have a larger Jewish population at the end of the war than at the beginning, according to Miles Lerman, a former director of the US National Holocaust Museum. Harvey Sarner, a Jewish American in awe of the Albanian Muslim response, penned the telling book "Rescue in Albania: One Hundred Percent of Jews in Albania Rescued from the Holocaust."

There were many Bosnian Muslims, especially in Sarajevo, who saved the lives of their Jewish compatriots. Indeed, the Jewish community in Sarajevo owed its very existence historically to the centuries-old Ottoman Muslim policy of providing sanctuary to Jews fleeing European Christian persecution.

Republican Turkey thankfully followed that same Ottoman tradition of rescue and sanctuary. Due to its neutrality during most of World War II, and its unique geographical proximity to both Europe and the Middle East, Turkey and Turkish diplomats living abroad played an important role for European Jews in danger during World War II and the Holocaust, according to the Anti-Defamation League. Muslim-majority Turkey rescued over 15,000 Turkish Jews and over 100,000 European Jews.

Like their Christian counterparts, the Muslim men and women who rescued Jews during the Holocaust are among history's true heroes, whose stories we should be telling our children and grandchildren. They represent the best of the Abrahamic and Islamic tradition and spirit. May God grant us true moral courage like the rescuers in the face of hardship and adversity. May God the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful free us of denying or exploiting the suffering of others.

Mas'ood Cajee's essay "My mom raised me as a Zionist" appeared in Michael Wolfe's award-winning anthology "Taking Back Islam" (Rodale Press, 2003).

Drama at the Election Commission

The Election Commission does not appear to be fully delivering due to structural deficiencies and personality factors. They need to move away from infighting and as a constitutional body stand tall and make all concerned realise that in matters pertaining to a credible poll they are really in charge and everything shall be under their watch. The glitter of camera shall not fritter away their valuable time.

the unfolding voter list drama.

The real issues

The Election Commission, as of now, without doubt appears to be a divided house, and one cannot fail to note the disparaging remarks of the learned commissioners made against each other. This is unfortunate at a time when the main worry of the concerned citizens of Bangladesh is the peaceful and fair holding of next general election. Their fears assume heightened significance as major opposition political parties have demanded basic reforms of the Election Commission and the Caretaker Government, without which they would not participate in the election.

There is no denying that on major issues the ruling political party and the major opposition are virtually at loggerheads. In such an environment, a constitutional body like Election Commission can be expected to be circumspect and discreet enough to draw the respect and admiration of the citizens so that the lurking doubts about the impartial holding of next general election are dispelled. The prevailing scenario, however, does not generate much optimism because we are already in an imbroglio over the modality of preparing/updating the voter list. The resolution of this dispute through the apex court may bring some relief but the complaints and the controversies that have arisen already in this connection are not amenable to easy solution.

Complaints like the registration of 64 lakh false voters during the Awami League tenure, as alleged by a ruling party stalwart, or the opposition party's suspicion that its sympathisers including the minorities would not be registered at all during the present process of making new voter list definitely deserve uppermost consideration. Such complaints are accorded prominence because there are additional allegations that the new voters list is being prepared with

active support and connivance of ruling party workers and its student and youth front. These complaints are surfacing in the wake of newspaper reports that more than 150 known ruling party supporters have been appointed in the Election Commission and that they are taking extra interest in the preparation of the new voter list.

The disappointing part of the election-related process is that we are not cognisant of the actual bottlenecks in the way of fair election and that there is inaction in undertaking those administrative steps that facilitate the fair and smooth conduct of election. For example, if recent experience is any guide, then one may say with some certitude that the malpractice of false or bogus voting will assume a worrying proportion in the next election which will be contested by two desperate political parties.

It would be relevant to recount that we do not have as yet a central registration of the population and the consequent provision of identity cards for each voter. This is the ground reality although we all know that impersonation and related malpractices seriously mar the credibility of our elections. So when in neighbouring India there is provision of ID card for each voter and the electronic voting system is nearly complete, we are still in confusion over voter ID project. The members of the public have a right to know the details in this respect because the constitutional body charged with the onerous duties of holding a credible election cannot perform its function satisfactorily without adequate administrative preparation. One would like to hear from the wise men at the Election Commission.

The recent appointment of 150 election officers, mostly allegedly partisan student and youth leaders belonging to the ruling party is another problematic dimension of the election conduct that might lead to serious altercation resulting

in violence. The fact that those persons have been appointed by the Public Service Commission will not mitigate the problem, because ground reality and popular perception about the impartiality of public appointments do not appear to be reassuring. Against this background, the cancellation of such appointments as demanded by the opposition aggravates the prospect of fair and peaceful election. Concerned citizens would like to be apprised of the Election Commission's policies and strategies on such a thorny issue.

Conduct of public servants

All public servants entrusted with election duties come under the control and supervision of the Election Commission for a fixed period. However, posting of so-called loyal and pliable officials in key positions by the party government prior to relinquishing power to the Caretaker Government creates administrative complications. The key question is what would be the criteria of selection and posting of an impartial public official during election time. The ground reality in this regard is that officials appointed and posted by a particular party government are not considered trustworthy by their adversaries. So what would the scenario be like during the next election? Without doubt, there would be demands and counter demands, allegations and counter allegations about the suitability of particular public officials. The Election Commission would have to make serious homework from now to face such eventuality and provide reasonably satisfying solutions. The quality of law enforcement affecting the fair election will depend significantly on the handling of this issue. The acrimony amongst public servants, both serving and retired, for well-known reasons as obtaining in our polarised polity, cannot be wished away. The Election Commission needs to take a hard look at such an unpleasant reality.

Deployment of armed forces personnel

While the salutary effect of the deployment of Armed Forces personnel is an undeniable fact, there were occasions when the political government was reluctant to deploy them even after repeated

requests from the Election Commission. There were differences of opinion even on the manner of their deployment.

It remains to be seen at what point of time during the next general election the Armed Forces personnel would be deployed. The time and manner of such deployment will come under intense public scrutiny during the next election. The defence forces would be under the control of the president, and the Election Commission has to make very prudent and efficient guidelines of their deployment for the desired impact on law enforcement. The Election Commission will be hard-pressed to make a pragmatic decision on this sensitive aspect.

The imperatives

There is an imperative need to allay the fears of the citizens with regard to the anticipated violence and mismanagement during the upcoming general election. In addition to correct registration of genuine voters, can we arrange to issue voter ID cards in at least the urban areas by October 2006? That would perhaps be a test of our sincerity and earnestness in holding a credible election.

Unless sufficient precautionary and remedial actions are taken in time, the election scenario will remain fraught with grave threats to public peace. The major political parties have a do or die mentality in their preparation for the battle at the hustings which undoubtedly does not bode well for a democratic polity. For many, this looks like the last election of their lifetime. Unfortunately, the myopia of such elements disgraces the inherent goodness of our folks, whose resilience and patience demand an enlightened management of the affairs of the state including the election.

The Election Commission does not appear to be fully delivering under the above circumstances due to structural deficiencies and personality factors. They need to move away from infighting and as a constitutional body stand tall and make all concerned realise that in matters pertaining to a credible poll they are really in charge and everything shall be under their watch. The glitter of camera shall not fritter away their valuable time.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former Secretary and IGP.



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE Election Commission is agog with activities for quite some time, through not always of the desirable kind. Journalists of both the print and the electronic media are regular visitors to the commission office, and interestingly enough, the very wise and erudite gentlemen firmly entrenched in their constitutionally exalted positions there are enjoying the company of the media men and women, particularly those of the electronic variety. Very lively interviews are being given by the learned commissioners holding diametrically opposite views on the issues of national importance like the preparation of fresh voter list or the updating of the same.

The dispute or divergence of opinion relating to the modality of preparing the voter list has reached the precincts of the apex court and directions have been given to the commission. However, the directives have caused further controversy, as one of the learned commissioners, according to newspaper reports, has questioned the propriety of the jurisdiction of the court in the matter of the preparation of the voter list. The temporarily indisposed Chief Election Commissioner has come back to his onerous charges and the Election Commission, we understand, is going to proffer an appeal against the order of the High Court Division on the subject of preparation of voter list. All in all, there is a near "Hitchcockian" dimension to

