

ABU Muhammad the money changer is sitting at his desk just off Manara Square in the centre of the West Bank city of Ramallah-- a day after the Palestinian presidential elections that swept Fatah candidate Mahmoud Abbas into office.

After changing a few hundred shekels with him, I remark: "So you voted for Bassam, did you?"

"How did you know?" Abu Muhammad snaps.

There is a look of slight panic on his face, until he follows my glance up to the large poster of Palestine People's Party candidate Bassam Salhi on the wall behind him.

"Oh yes, that," he says grinning.

But any PPP posters Abu Muhammad had in his shop window have now all been taken down and folded up on a shelf near the door.

It may have been the most open and transparent election the Arab world has seen in years, but supporters of losing candidates don't seem to be taking any chances now the results are out.

Especially as Manara Square is bustling with overconfident young men wearing trademark black and white kuffiya shawls and cravats of Fatah round their necks, chatting and smoking in the icy afternoon wind.

Vehicles bedecked with pictures of the winner also known as Abu Mazen have been driving around Ramallah hooting their horns. Fatah gunmen have been walking the streets, firing in the air. Expensive European-made cars fly little Palestinian flags.

Losing candidates

Abu Muhammad says he is happy with the election, despite his candidate polling just 2.5% of the vote.

"The people have chosen their preferred candidate. It is a golden result," he says, with absolute sincerity.

His sangfroid doesn't seem to be shared by supporters of the best-performing opposition candidate, human rights activist Mustafa Barghouti - who got nearly 20% of the vote.

A shop in the Bireh district that I visited last Saturday, which had two large posters of Mustafa Barghouti and

Yasser Arafat up in the window, now only has Yasser Arafat.

The owners were among several Barghouti supporters I met before the election who said that they only wanted to be identified as such "after the result".

Now they are definitely not saying anything on the record.

Maybe it's because Dr Barghouti actually took votes from Abu Mazen, but you can almost feel the sense of triumphalism among Fatah supporters that their well-oiled political machine delivered hundreds of thousands of votes more than the independent candidate.

And today the ultra-loyal street urchins - who all claim to have voted, by the way - can be overheard talking about that "bastard" who should never have challenged Abu Mazen.

Fragrant voter

At the Bilqis perfume store, Zakaria is testing some perfume on the back of his hand that he wants to buy for his wife. The thumb is stained dark by the once-purple paint used to stop electors trying to vote twice on Sunday.

I ask him who he voted for and he said no-one, he just put an unmarked voting slip in the box to register his complaint about the election process.

And he insists the turnout was embarrassingly low, just 775,000 of a possible... well no-one knows exactly how many Palestinian electors there are, anything between 1.2m and 2m, and only 483,000 of those voted for Abu Mazen.

Outside, though, I get chatting to a cleancut young

man who tells me earnestly that he is very proud of the poll, though he is sceptical that Abu Mazen will be any more capable of advancing the cause of peace with Israel than his predecessor.

"We have shown the rest of the Arab World that we can have a free and fair election and choose our leaders democratically," he said.

If only the runner-up's supporters felt a bit less intimidated by the victors, it would be even better.

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Sore Winners in Ramallah

Palestinians hail democratic poll, but some losers feel intimidated.

MARTIN ASSER

