

How do you like your democracy now, Mr. Bush?

Bush has boxed himself into an impossible situation. He promoted elections that have produced results opposite of the ones he wanted. For all his constant rhetoric about his determination to hunt down and kill terrorists, in Palestine he has in effect helped install into power a group he calls "terrorists." His confusion over whether this is democracy, which should be legitimate, or is an unacceptable outcome -- and his unwillingness to address the underlying issues behind the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- suggest that a fatal paralysis will continue to afflict the region.

JUAN COLE

THE stunning victory of the militant Muslim fundamentalist Hamas Party in the Palestinian elections underlines the central contradictions in the Bush administration's policies toward the Middle East. Bush pushes for elections, confusing them with democracy, but seems blind to the dangers of right-wing populism. At the same time, he continually undermines the moderate and secular forces in the region by acting high-handedly or allowing his clients to do so. As a result, Sunni fundamentalist parties, some with ties to violent cells, have emerged as key players in Iraq, Egypt, and Palestine.

Democracy depends not just on elections but on a rule of law, on stable institutions, on basic economic security for the population, and on checks and balances that forestall a tyranny of the majority. Elections in the absence of this key societal context can produce authoritarian regimes and abuses as easily as they can produce genuine people power. Bush is on the whole unwilling to invest sufficiently in these key institutions and

practices abroad. And by either creating or failing to deal with foreign occupations, he has sown the seeds for militant Islamist movements that gain popularity because of their nationalist credentials.

In Iraq, which is among the least secure and most economically fraught countries in the world, the December 15 elections brought into parliament a set of powerful Shiite fundamentalist parties and a new force, the Muslim fundamentalist Iraqi Accord Front, which gained most of the votes of formerly secular-minded Iraqi Sunnis. Some IAF politicians are suspect of strong ties to Iraq's Sunni insurgency.

In Egypt, last fall's election increased representation for the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood from 17 to more than 70 seats in parliament, making that group a key political player for the first time in Egyptian history. Decades ago, the party once assassinated a prime minister and attempted to assassinate President Gamal Abdul Nasser, but now maintains it has turned to moderation. It aims at the imposition of a rigid interpretation of Islamic law on Egyptians, including Egyptian

women.

Now Hamas, or the Islamic Resistance Movement, a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, has come to power in Palestine. In his press conference on Thursday, Bush portrayed the Palestinian elections in the same way he depicts Republican Party victories over Democrats in the United States: "The people are demanding honest government. 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 healthcare." He sounds like a spokesman for Hamas, underlining the irony that Bush and his party have given Americans the least honest government in a generation, have drastically cut services, and have actively opposed extension of healthcare to the uninsured in the United States.

But the president's attempt to dismiss the old ruling Fatah Party as corrupt and inefficient, however true, is also a way of taking the spotlight off his own responsibility for the stagnation in Palestine. Bush allowed then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to sideline the ruling Fatah Party of Yasser Arafat, to fire missiles at its police stations, and to reduce its leader to a besieged nonentity. Sharon arrogantly ordered the murder of civilian Hamas leaders in Gaza, making them martyrs. Meanwhile, Israeli settlements continued to grow, the fatally flawed Oslo agreements delivered nothing to the Palestinians, and Bush and Sharon ignored new peace plans -- whether the so-called Geneva accord put forward by Palestinian and Israeli moderates or the Saudi peace plan -- that could have resolved the underlying issues. The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, which should have been a big step forward for peace, was marred by the refusal of the Israelis to cooperate with the Palestinians in ensur-

ing that it did not produce a power vacuum and further insecurity.

Frustrated, the Palestinian public predictably swung to the far right. Their embrace of Hamas does not indicate that most Palestinians are dedicated to destroying Israel; polls show that most support a two-state solution and are weary of the endless violence. Rather, they are sick of the Palestinian Authority and believe that Hamas will be more effective negotiating partners with the Israelis. As a Saudi political talk show host told the Associated Press, "They [Hamas] will be the Arab Sharon. They will be tough, but only a tough group can snatch concessions from Israel."

In a mystifying self-contradiction, Bush trumpeted that "the Palestinians had an election yesterday, the results of which remind me about the power of democracy." If elections were really the same as democracy, and if Bush was so happy about the process, then we might expect him to pledge to work with the results, which by his lights would be intrinsically good. But then he suddenly swerved away from this line of thought, reverting to boilerplate and saying, "On the other hand, I don't see how you can be a partner in peace if you advocate the destruction of a country as part of your platform. And I know you can't be a partner in peace if you have a -- if your party has got an armed wing."

So Bush is saying that even though elections are democracy and democracy is good and powerful, it has produced unacceptable results in this case, and so the resulting Hamas government will lack the legitimacy necessary to allow the United States to deal with it or go forward in any peace process. Bush's double standard is clear in his dictio, since he was perfectly happy to deal with Israel's Likud Party, which is dedicated to

Despite Hamas' founding position that the Israeli state is illegitimate, violence is not foreordained. A Hamas leader, Mahmoud Zahar,

the destruction of the budding Palestinian state, and which used the Israeli military and security services for its party platform in destroying the infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority throughout the early years of this century. As Orwell reminded us in "Animal Farm," some are more equal than others.

President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah had earlier been elected in a separate process and could continue in office if he chooses to work with a Hamas-dominated cabinet. He had earlier hinted that he would resign if his party lost. Asked about a possible resignation, Bush said in his typically tongue-tied way, "We'd like him to stay in power. I mean, we'd like to stay in office. He is in power; we'd like him to stay in office." Khaled Mashaal, the Hamas leader who is in exile in Syria, said that his party would be willing to work with Abbas as president, according to a party spokesman.

But then when Bush was asked if the United States would end aid to the Palestinian Authority if a Hamas government was formed, he implied that it would, unless Hamas changed its platform, which opposes the existence of the state of Israel on the grounds that the territory belongs to the Palestinians. He said, "Well, I made it very clear that the United States does not support political parties that want to destroy our ally Israel, and that people must renounce that part of their platform."

Bush implied that Hamas is dedicated to unmitigated violence against Israel. And since 1994 its military wing has launched many suicide attacks against Israelis, killing hundreds of people, most of them civilians. But in fact it has observed a more or less effective truce for about a year -- indeed, as an important study carried out by the respected International Crisis Group pointed out, it has observed the truce far more reliably than Fatah. And Hamas' leaders have affirmed that they are willing to continue the truce if Israel refrains from aggressive violence toward them.

To be sure, many Israelis believe that Hamas is only using the truce to rearm, that it will never change its opposition to the very existence of Israel, and that any negotiations with the Islamist group will only weaken the Jewish state. And Hamas' failure to speak clearly about its intentions does nothing to allay such fears.



Armed militants from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an offshoot of the Fatah movement, tot their rifles during a demonstration during a demonstration in the northern West Bank city of Nablus, 28 January 2006. Thousands of Palestinians and dozens of masked militants demonstrated in the troubled northern West Bank calling on Fatah leaders to resign and boycott any new Hamas-led government.

told the Associated Press that his party would continue what he called its year-old "truce" if Israel did the same. "If not," he added, "then I think we will have no option but to protect our people and our land." More fundamentally, even Hamas' charter could change. As the ICG points out, Hamas "has accepted the principle that there is no religious prohibition against negotiating or co-existing with Israel and that the provisions in its charter providing for Israel's destruction are not indelible."

Even President Bush, in his measured response to the elections, seemed to hold out hope that Hamas would adopt a more pragmatic stance.

There is no evidence that either party will do so. Bush announced early in his administration his unwillingness to do anything that would challenge Sharon. For his part, acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is following in Sharon's footsteps. He said that he would refuse to deal with the Palestinian Authority if it was led by Hamas or included Hamas as a

partner, and that he would continue to take the high-handed unilateral actions planned by Sharon, including holding on to the large Israeli settlements in the West Bank and refusing to negotiate the status of Jerusalem.

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Acting Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

The president speaks

BARE FACTS

To what extent has the president's speech met the nation's expectations by addressing the burning issues that have made the political situation in the country highly volatile and even given rise to the talks of "military takeover or intervention of any third force" as well as some other issues of national importance?

THE house of the people at the commencement of the first session of each year makes reference, among others, to the policies, programmes and developmental activities of the government.

But it has to be remembered that the president of Bangladesh, unlike his counterpart in India, a country with a long tradition of parliamentary democracy, is not the chief executive of the republic. Unlike the Indian president or the British monarch, he is not a part of parliament. Unlike the president of India, the president of Bangladesh cannot use the term "my government."

Although the president's speech narrates the success story of the activities and achievements of the alliance government, it makes no specific reference to the prevailing grave political crisis resulting from the refusal of the government to discuss caretaker government reform proposal of the AL-led 14-party opposition combine within the parliament or outside. Nor does the president's speech stress the need for enacting a law to regulate the appointments in the Election Commission (EC) as required under Article 118(1) of the constitution.

A constitutional requirement has remained unimplemented for the last 14 years of independence. As a result, the succeeding political governments appointed persons loyal to them as chief election commissioners and election commissioners. This has resulted in the politicisation of a national institution of utmost importance. The present crisis in the EC is a case in point. This even prompted the European Union delegation troika that visited Bangladesh last week to strongly advocate for a really independent EC for holding a free and fair parliamentary election that should be acceptable to all.

The president's speech makes no mention about the unbridled corruption in the country that occupied the number one position in the corruption perception index of the Berlin-based Transparency International for five consecutive years beginning from 2001 including the past four years of the BNP-led alliance government. Corruption has badly affected the rate of economic growth in the country and increased the gap of distribution of wealth in the society making rich people richer and poor people poorer. Above all, corruption has shattered the people's dream of a nation that would stand with its head high.

The president's speech makes no

mention about the untold sufferings of the people, particularly of the poor and the fixed wage earners, due to continuous price spiral of essentials. The point-point inflation rate hit a new 8-year high of 7.95 percent in November. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the rate was higher in rural areas than the urban ones, aggravating the continued miseries of the rural poor. Economists are of the opinion that excessive government borrowing from the banking channel, depreciation of taka against the US dollar over the last one year, no open-way competitive system for import, which has given rise to the hegemony of a particular group of businessmen close to the establishment on import and created opportunity for them to manipulate the prices of imported goods, and several domestic price hikes last year have contributed to the persistent upward flight of inflation. The trend of inflation rate hits the poor more severely, as they have little ability to adjust with the increased prices of essentials.

The president's speech urged the people and the political parties "to resist united any wrongful attempt of making the nation unstable through terrorism and anarchism." The speech has stressed that "any vile endeavour for creating anarchism through terrorism, violent political activities and bomb-blasts cannot be accepted." This part of the speech deserves appreciation.

But the question arises as to why the alliance government allowed the terrorism to gain its strength by refusing for a considerable period of time to recognise the existence of terrorism. Some very responsible leaders of the alliance government even termed "Bangla Bhai" as the creation of the media. The alliance government has so far failed to unearth the names of those who are really behind the misguided Islamic militants and bring them to book.

The president has termed parliament as "the heart of practising democracy" and invited the members of parliament "for constructive, effective and active participation for establishing democracy rising above jealousy, malice, personal and party interests." The president's observation and appeal definitely deserves consideration of the lawmakers belonging to the treasury and opposition benches.

But, has the government taken any sincere move to bring the main opposition back to the house? Has the speaker, the guardian of parliament, initiated any serious effort to

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Spanish perspectives on immigration



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

ACCORDING to a report published by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics on January 17, 8.6 percent of the Spanish population is now of foreign origin. The total population has jumped from 39.85 million in 1998 to 44.11 million in 2005, which in view of the low birth rate among the native population, can be considered as a remarkable achievement.

This population growth has largely been due to the massive influx of foreigners in recent years. In the European Union (EU), Spain is the member country that has received the second largest number of immigrants over the past decade. While in 1998, only 630,000 people were of foreign origin, now 3,730,000 people have foreign

parents.

There are 511,294 (13.7 percent)

immigrants from Morocco, whose

religion is Islam and whose mother

tongue is Arabic. They constitute

the largest group of foreigners

living in Spain.

Close to half a million Spanish-speaking immigrants (13.3 percent)

from Ecuador form the second largest group.

The presence of significant immigrant communities from Romania, Bulgaria, Colombia, Argentina, and Bolivia was also highlighted in the report.

From an economic point of view,

all these countries are considered

as developing ones. There are

several thousand Bangladeshi

immigrants in Madrid and

Barcelona. Many of them are either

street vendors or run neighbour-

hood grocery stores. The wealthier

ones own restaurants or are in the

import-export business.

No wonder, the presence of so

many foreigners with diverse

ethnic, religious, linguistic and

cultural backgrounds, particularly

in areas like Balearic Islands, Madrid, Catalonia, Valencia, Murcia and Canary Islands, where there are heavy concentrations of them, has contributed to the perception among many Spaniards that there are too many immigrants in this country.

According to the latest survey conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research, Spaniards consider immigration as the second largest national problem after unemployment.

Leaving aside the foreseeable

pensions crisis, in Spain and other

EU countries, the cost of looking

after growing numbers of older

people has fallen on the shoulders

of a dwindling number young

people paying taxes and social

security contributions.

The recent increase in the num-

ber of young immigrant workers

has to some extent eased the situa-

tion in Spain. According to

Eurostat, at present, Spain has the

second lowest percentage of young

people (14.5 percent) in the EU.

Italy, with 14.4 percent occupies

the first place.

Since the immigrants have a greater

rate than the local population, it is

expected that as their children

grow and join the workforce, the

demographic composition of

Spain will gradually change for the

better.

According to the latest OECD

report, Spain's gross domestic

product would grow by over 3

percent in 2006 and 2007. This

growth would be significantly

higher than that of Germany,

France, and Italy. The International

Monetary Fund has also forecasted

a similar growth pattern for Spain.

It has