

# The Year of the Victory of Hamas

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## Antoni Segura

Professor of Contemporary History

Director

Centre d'Estudis Històrics Internacionals, Universitat de Barcelona

On 26th January 2006 legislative elections were held in Palestine for the second time since the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993 and 1995; the first elections were held in January 1996 without the participation of Hamas and with a clear victory for Fatah. Thus, an electoral cycle was brought to a close; it had begun with the local elections held in four phases between 2004 and 2005 and, following the death of Yasser Arafat, with the presidential elections of 2005 in which Mahmoud Abbas was elected as the new chairman of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). In August 2005, Ariel Sharon began the announced unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip; however, this did not stop the Israeli Army raids during 2006 and the closing of the border when necessary,

thus sealing off the area completely and preventing it from having contacts with the outside world. In spite of the difficulties derived from continuous occupation, the elections were carried out in such a climate of freedom and transparency as never before witnessed in an Arab country; this was confirmed by the reports submitted by over 1,042 international observers (of which 33 were from Spain) who attended and supervised the campaign and the electoral process. The results could be anticipated in view of the events that took place during the latest stages of the local elections, particularly during the fourth stage of December 2005, in which Hamas won 73% of the votes and 13 out of 15 municipalities in dispute in the West Bank. The legislative elections thus gave a clear and indisputable victory to the Islamic Resistance Movement – Hamas – which was by far greater than the polls' forecast of a tie in the results between Fatah and Hamas. The final results of the count, with 77.18% voter participation (out of 1,350,034 voters registered by 1st January 2006) were:

TABLE 24 25th January 2006 Legislative Elections

Political party	Total Seats by Lists	%	Total Seats by Districts <sup>1</sup>	Total Seats
Change and Reform <sup>2</sup>	29	44.45	45	74
Fatah	28	41.43	17	45
Martyr Abu Ali Mustapha <sup>3</sup>	3	4.25	0	3
The Alternative <sup>4</sup>	2	2.92	0	2
Independent Palestine <sup>5</sup>	2	2.72	0	2
The Third Way <sup>6</sup>	2	2.41	0	2
Independent list	0	-	4	4

(<sup>1</sup>) There are 16 electoral districts with a number of seats ranging from 9 in the Hebron district, 8 in Gaza and 6 in Jerusalem and Nablus to a single seat for Tubas, Salfit and Jericho respectively. A total percentage calculation is of no use, since the difference in the number of voters between districts and the Christian minority quotas (2 deputies for both Jerusalem and Bethlehem and 1 in Ramallah /Al-Bireh and Gaza) account for a distortion factor that cannot be corrected.

(<sup>2</sup>) Hamas.

(<sup>3</sup>) Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)

(<sup>4</sup>) Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), People's Party, Fida and the independents.

(<sup>5</sup>) Electoral list headed by Mustapha Barguti

(<sup>6</sup>) Electoral list headed by Salam Fayad and Hanan Asharaui.

Fatah's electoral setback by districts gave all of the 9 seats to Hamas in Hebron and only retained 6 seats of the 5 Gaza electoral districts – half of them in Rafah – accounting for 25%, while Hamas won 15 and 3 went to the Independents); the defeat was a little less conclusive in the rest of districts in the West Bank (11 seats accounting for 33% for Fatah while Hamas won 21 and the Independents 1). The key to this indisputable majority won by Hamas was already underlying in the feeling of frustration after nearly four decades of occupation: the failure of the Oslo Accords which Hamas opposed from the beginning and which ten years after have not led to the creation of a politically and territorially viable Palestinian state, while the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank has grown tenfold in the same period; the high levels of corruption that have undermined the credibility of the PNA and the leaders of Fatah; and the ever-increasing difficulties for the survival of the Palestine population, especially in the Gaza strip. The victory of Hamas had immediate consequences: in March Israel refused to have contacts with a government led by Hamas and suspended the payment of revenues collected (VAT, customs duties and donor payments that account for three quarters of the PNA budget) while it tightened security measures (restrictions on the movement of goods and persons, shutting off the border crossings between the occupied territories and the outside world) and resumed military operations, especially in Gaza. The United States and the European Union, who had listed Hamas as a terrorist organization, also responded negatively to this victory of the Islamic movement and halted the transfer of international aid funds to the PNA. In March the EU urged Hamas to give up violence and acknowledge the State of Israel if it wanted the PNA government to continue receiving financial aid. As a consequence of these measures, the GDP per capita fell by 27% in 2006 while personal income fell by 30% to the extent that, according to a report by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA, *Emergency Appeal, 2007*: [www.un.org/unrwa/emergency/appeals/2007-appeal.pdf](http://www.un.org/unrwa/emergency/appeals/2007-appeal.pdf)), poverty levels increased significantly during 2006. In June 2006, 2.7 million people (over a total population of 3.7 million) were living below the poverty line, of which 2.4 million were living in extreme poverty, without having the minimum income to meet their basic clothing, housing and food needs. Of course, the situation is much worse in the Gaza Strip, where endemic poverty affects 87.7% of homes (55.6% in the West Bank) and extreme poverty affects

79.8% (43.2% in the West Bank). According to a 2006 Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the degrading situation of the occupied territories is also seen in the data for the year 2004 of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which are grouped with middle-income countries and placed in number 100 in a list of 177 countries (<http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/pdfs/report/HDR06-complete.pdf>).

Additionally, the suspension in the transfer of revenues directly affected the payment of PNA government workers who had been paid only two months' salary since February 2006, and which led to a strike and internal tensions that caused violent clashes between the various security services under the control of the PNA presidency and the Hamas government. All this happened amidst an anomalous political situation: in June 2006 the Legislative Council had met only on three occasions, and a number of Hamas members were arrested by Israeli Forces during the spring and summer 2006 military operations.

The kidnapping of an Israeli soldier on 25th June triggered the Israeli military attack on the Gaza Strip known as Operation Summer Rain. The operation was clearly out of all proportion and it included air and ground attacks with combat cars and artillery that caused scores of victims on the Gaza Strip and destroyed vital infrastructures such as the only existing electric power station; likewise, 64 elected officials of Hamas were arrested, including legislators, mayors and ministers. A number of military operations were carried out in the West Bank, although they went largely unnoticed as the media mostly reported on the impact of the massive Israeli raid in Lebanon, also in the summer, and which caused over 1,000 dead and an overall destruction of infrastructures. By fall, on 1st November, Israeli Forces began a large military operation in Beit Hanoun to put an end to rocket attacks launched on cities of Israel. The army occupied the zone for six days, imposed a 24-hour curfew and destroyed infrastructures while it shut off water and electricity supplies and health services for the population. The final toll of Operation Autumn Clouds was of 82 Palestine dead, of which at least 39 were civilians (18 women and 10 children) and over 260 injured people. An Israeli soldier was shot dead by a sniper. (UNRWA, *Beit Hanoun Flash Appeal*: [www.un.org/unrwa/emergency/appeals/BeitHanoun\\_FA\\_Nov06.pdf](http://www.un.org/unrwa/emergency/appeals/BeitHanoun_FA_Nov06.pdf)). Even after the withdrawal of Israeli Forces from northern Gaza, two Israeli shells were fired over a group of houses on 8th November, which

resulted in 19 dead – of which 13 were members of the same family — and 60 injured in what was called a “technical error” by Prime Minister Yehud Olmert. To sum up, the material damage caused in the Gaza Strip contributed to aggravating the difficult financial situation of the population to such an extent that UNRWA made an emergency appeal to the international community in 2007 in the face of a potential crisis of food supplies that would have terrible consequences.

Meanwhile, Chairman Mahmoud Abbas was barely successful in his attempt to conform a national unity government that would do away with the embargo of international financial aid, and threatened to call for early legislative and presidential elections if Hamas refused to accept such a government. However, as the year came to a close the national unity government had not been formed and Abbas failed to announce early elections, in a climate of growing tension with the militias of the Islamic movement, which in May 2006 created their own police forces dependent on the Ministry of the Interior, while the Fatah militia supported presidential security forces. In the final months of 2006 they were on the verge of a civil war and scores of victims were counted; in early 2007 Abbas outlawed Hamas’ police force while President Bush requested from the US Congress an additional 80 million dollars in aid for the Abbas and Fatah-controlled security force comprised by some 18,000 men.

The balance for 2006 in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is possibly the worst that could be imagined after the signing of the Oslo Accords and the death of Yasser Arafat. The second legislative elections were held in full compliance with these agreements and under close international observation, and resulted in an indisputable victory for Hamas. Israel and the United States did not accept the new negotiator, while the EU asked the Islamic movement to give up violence and acknowledge the State of Israel as a precondition to be accepted as a valid negotiator; Fatah’s response was to present its refusal of a Hamas government as a fact by entrenching itself in the powers it still retains within the PNA presidency. Consequently, the financial aid to the PNA was embargoed, which resulted in economic recession that could lead to a food supplies crisis of catastrophic magnitude; violence in the form of suicide attacks or rocket attacks did not cease; disproportionate military operations by Israeli Forces in the Gaza Strip, and to a lesser extent, in the West Bank caused

hundreds of dead and injured and massive destruction of infrastructures that further worsened the already difficult living conditions for most of the Palestinian population; and the death toll of growing tensions between the Palestinian militias is increasing by scores and could easily lead to a covert civil war. To sum up, it is evident that this is not a situation in which to feel optimistic, and this is reflected in the latest opinion polls carried out by the *Palestinian Center for Public Opinion* ([www.pcpo.ps/polls.htm](http://www.pcpo.ps/polls.htm)), which describes a state of confusion, dejection and frustration.

1. In October 2006, 65.4% of respondents showed support for the government workers’ strike; 61.8% was against the dissolution of the PNA; 45.9% regarded the policy of Chairman Abbas as “good” or “very good”; likewise 40% regarded Prime Minister Haniyeh’s policy in the same way; 57.5% showed various degrees of agreement with the holding of early legislative elections, but only 42.5% agreed, also in various degrees, to holding early presidential elections; 35.3% were in favour of forming a national unity government and 30.1% believed Ismail Haniyeh was the most credible politician to lead a unity government; 33.5% believed that US intervention was responsible for the current Palestine crisis and 27.7% believed that this strengthened Hamas postures.
2. In November 2006, 80.9% of Palestinians showed concern for the survival of their families and 78.6% for their personal security; 78.1% believed that the economic situation was bad and 62.3% were pessimistic about the improvement of the political and economic conditions; 62.1% believed the US, Israel and other donor countries were responsible for the worsening of the economic conditions in the Palestinian territories.
3. In January 2007, 80.4% of the respondents were in fear of their personal security; 77.2% believed that suspension of financial aid contributed to increase violence in the region; 60.7% were in favour of holding new legislative elections and 54.9% showed various degrees of agreement with holding presidential elections. Among the former, 26% disclosed their intention to vote for Ismail Haniyeh and 21.8% for Marian Barguti, a Fatah leader currently jailed in an Israeli prison; among the latter, 35% showed a preference to vote for Mahmoud Abbas.