



ABBAS WINS PALESTINIAN ELECTION, RAISING HOPES FOR PEACE

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Mahmoud Abbas won the Palestinian presidential election Sunday, raising hopes for the possibility of a separate Palestinian state at peace with Israel.

Official results showed that Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, received 62 percent of the vote to replace Yasser Arafat, who died Nov. 11, 2004. His main opponent, independent candidate Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, received 20 percent of the vote.

Abbas, the moderate leader of the Fatah political party who has the support of the United States and many in the international community, has spoken publicly against suicide bombers and other violence and pledged to reform the government.

“There is a difficult mission ahead to build our state,” he said Sunday night. “To achieve security for our people, to give our prisoners freedom, our fugitives a life in dignity, to reach our goal of an independent state.”

Like Arafat before him, Abbas wants a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, as well as a solution for Palestinian refugees who were forced to leave their homes when the Jewish state was founded in 1948.

Hope for peace with Israel

Israeli leaders, including Labor Party leader Shimon Peres, praised Abbas and expressed hope that peace talks between Israeli and Palestinian leaders, which broke down in 2001, could resume.

“A moderate man was elected, an intelligent man, an experienced man. Let’s give him a chance. There is a new legitimate Palestinian leadership whose leaders definitely are against terror and war,” Peres said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon plans to meet with Abbas soon, according to his aides.

Controlling armed groups

But Abbas also has the difficult task of reining in armed militant groups, who have used violence and terrorism to fight Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories.

“Will he fight against the terrorists? Will he try to stop this bloody, violent war against the state of Israel? This is the main question,” Israeli vice premier Ehud Olmert told CNN.

The largest Islamic militant group, Hamas, pledged on Monday that it will work with Abbas, despite earlier calls to boycott the election.

A milestone election

The election, the first for president in nine years, proceeded largely without incident. For many the most important outcome of the election is the advancement of democracy.

“This is a historic vote for us,” senior Fatah leader Ahmed Ghnaim told The Washington Post. “The most important thing is not the winner. The most important thing is to see the Palestinian people committed to the principle of democracy.”

Many Palestinians hope Abbas can end the four years of violence that has resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians and ruined the economy.

“Today is the beginning of a new future,” said Sami Radwan, 55, a restaurant owner in Gaza City. “Abu Mazen is the right choice. He is the one who can bring us peace, good business and security.”

U.S. reaction

In the United States, President Bush said the elections were a “historic” step toward a Palestinian state.

“The United States stands ready to help the Palestinian people realize their aspirations,” Mr. Bush said.

“The new Palestinian president and his Cabinet face critical tasks ahead, including fighting terrorism, combating corruption, building reformed and democratic institutions and reviving the Palestinian economy.”

The president also announced he would welcome the newly elected Palestinian president to the White House, a gesture he denied the late Yasser Arafat.

-- Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra