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MAKAU MUTUA

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## Rejecting the urge to isolate Hamas

By Makau Mutua | March 27, 2006

CONTRARY TO popular political rhetoric in the West, it is a colossal mistake to isolate Hamas, the Islamist movement poised to form the next government in the Palestinian Authority. It is neither democratic nor politically defensible to deny a people the right to be governed by a party they have freely elected to power. If the West truly supports democracy, it must accept a Hamas government.

Hamas is not a garden-variety political party. But the occupied territories are not a run-of-the-mill political entity. It is a society that has been under occupation and colonization for decades. Hamas rose to power because of the failure of the Western-led Oslo peace process, the virtual collapse of the Palestinian Authority, and impotence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Like it or not, Hamas is now the embodiment of the sovereignty of the people of Palestine.

It smacks of hypocrisy for the West and Israel to accept the participation of Hamas in the elections and then reject its victory over Fatah, the party of PLO leader Mahmoud Abbas. This is tantamount to accepting the results of a fair contest only if your preferred side wins. That is not how democracy works. What moral authority or consistency can the United States -- and the West -- claim if they reject a democratically elected Hamas government?

I know all the arguments against Hamas. The West has declared it a terrorist organization. It refuses to accept the existence of Israel. It has incubated suicide bombers and attacked civilians. Its Islamist blueprint would subordinate women and violate the rights of moderates and non-Muslims. But Hamas endeared itself to Palestinians by providing social services and adopting a zero-tolerance policy to corruption. That is partly why it won.

Some have minimized the victory of Hamas by claiming that it was a protest vote. They argue that Palestinians did not really want Hamas to win, even though they resoundingly voted for it. Where else in the Middle East, including Israel, has a political party won such a huge mandate in a free vote? These denials seek to thwart the will of Palestinians.

No matter the objections to Hamas, there is blame on both sides of conflict. The Israelis have carried out a policy of occupation and colonization, border closings, assassinations, checkpoints, a barrier, and detentions. On the Palestinians' side, attacks on civilians and suicide bombings have claimed scores of Israelis. But it is these mortal enemies that must make peace.

Until now, Hamas operated outside the formal structures of Palestinian society, which were dominated by the PLO. Internationally, the PLO was accepted as the legitimate representative of Palestinians. But rampant corruption within the Palestinian Authority and the failure of the PLO to deliver an independent Palestinian state eroded internal legitimacy. Yasser Arafat came to personify these failures. Abu Mazen, as President Abbas is known, inherited them.

There has been no peace process between Israelis and Palestinians. The so-called road map has been nothing but a cruel illusion. The truth is that neither side -- Palestinian nor Israeli -- has had the political will to make the hard decisions on a two-state solution.

Despite objections, there are several reasons to root for the success of a Hamas government. Among the key players, only Hamas has the potential to shake up this irredeemable paralysis and inject new life into the peace process. But that will not happen if the West and Israel choke off a Hamas government. It is important that Hamas is not captive to the pathologies of Oslo.

Spurning Hamas will only further radicalize it and the Palestinian people, making peace more elusive. The

policy of isolation will be proof positive to Palestinians that no matter what they do -- including a democratic election -- the Israelis and the West will never permit them statehood. This will harden Hamas and narrow the space for moderates in Palestinian society. It will also diminish the influence of secularists and liberals.

Hamas is a reality that simply cannot be wished away. As the government, Hamas is more likely to adopt pragmatic and internationally acceptable policies. Over time, it should soften its stance toward Israel, step back from Islamist programs, and permit women's rights. It has no other choice if it wants the allegiance of the Palestinian people, the majority of whom are secular, moderate, and liberal. Nor can it acquire international legitimacy otherwise. It is a hopeful sign that Hamas desperately wanted to form a coalition government with moderates before other factions turned it down.

The United States and the European Union -- who write the checks for the Palestinian Authority -- must not cut off aid to the Hamas government. Doing so is shortsighted, undemocratic, and foolhardy. Liberation movements normally mellow in the aftermath of political victory.

The West must remember that it once designated Nelson Mandela's African National Congress a terrorist organization. Engaging Hamas -- as opposed to isolating it -- may establish the first real political democracy in the Arab world.

Makau Mutua is director of the Human Rights Center at the State University of New York at Buffalo. ■

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