

THE PROGRESSIVE INTERVIEW

by Jon Elmer

Hanan Ashrawi

Hanan Ashrawi is a Palestinian legislator, academic, and intellectual who was reelected to the Palestinian Legislative Council in January's national elections. Ashrawi's party is the Third Way, a newly created political faction that won two seats in the 132-seat council.

A frequently cited spokesperson for the Palestinian national movement, Ashrawi was a prominent member of the 1991 Madrid peace talks and was Palestinian National Authority minister of higher education and research in Yasser Arafat's cabinet from 1996 until 1998, when she resigned citing corruption and the mismanagement of peace negotiations.

In 1998, she became the general secretary of MIFTAH, the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy. In 2003, Ashrawi

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was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize.

Ashrawi has a doctorate in medieval and comparative literature from the University of Virginia. She is the author or editor of numerous works of literature and poetry, and a memoir, *This Side of Peace: A Personal Account*. She was the first chair of the English Department at Birzeit University, where she later became the dean of arts. She was born in Ramallah during the British Mandate in Palestine; she lives there today.

I spoke with her by phone from Ramallah on February 15.

Q • Were January's Palestinian Legislative Council elections fair?

Hanan Ashrawi: The elections, technically, were free and fair, yes. But if you look at the substance they were not. They took place under occupation, so the results were tainted by the practices and measures of the occupation.

When you have a nation that is suffering collectively from a situation of injustice—of violence, of imprisonment and closure and checkpoints, from a sense of vulnerability and of hopelessness—attitudes are going to be affected by these measures.

Q: There was about 80 percent voter turnout in the West Bank and Gaza, so is it fair to say that the outcome of the election represents the will of the Palestinian people?

Ashrawi: Yes, of course. The 80 percent participation showed that the Palestinian people are very active, very involved, very political, and they wanted change.

Q: The perception outside the West Bank and Gaza is that people were shocked by Hamas's win. Were you shocked?

Ashrawi: I was not shocked, but I was surprised by the degree of the victory. I thought it would be closer between Hamas and Fatah, certainly not an absolute majority.

But the results reflected many things, including the Palestinian people's will to take revenge on Fatah, to punish Fatah for the corruption and mismanagement. There was quite a bit of a protest vote, and there was also a vote that sent a message to Israel and the U.S. People said to Israel, if you are going to be violent and hardline, we are going to elect your counterparts in Palestine—hardline and violent.

Even many of those who voted for Hamas surprised themselves. Many of them voted for Hamas to either punish Fatah or to tell the Americans that you

cannot leave us at the mercy of this occupation. They felt that the failure of the peace camp and the moderates meant there is only one option: Hamas and the agenda of resistance and reform.

The Palestinian people are sick and tired of being victimized.

Q: Some have called Hamas's victory a political tsunami.

Ashrawi: This is a serious transformation; it is unprecedented.

It is a serious transformation politically, but more than that socially. Palestinian society has always been much more open, tolerant, pluralistic, not a religion-based society. Palestinians were religious in many ways, but they did not subscribe to political Islam, historically.

That is why many people are still reeling from the shock; in many ways people are confused, and do not know what to expect.

For decades, since the mid-twentieth century, the nationalist movement, and Fatah in particular, has dominated the political scene. Palestinian politics were primarily nationalistic, secular. Now, suddenly we are seeing the election of a religious party with extreme political ideologies and with a social agenda that seems inconsistent with the cultural heritage of the Palestinian people.

Q: How do you think Hamas will govern?

Ashrawi: Should we expect a theocracy? Should we expect a repressive, closed system? Should we expect a forced transformation of the social norms, habits, and behavioral patterns? Are they going to change the basic laws? Are they committed to international norms and conventions dealing with basic rights and fundamental freedoms? Hamas says not to worry, but people don't know what to expect.

There are also questions pertaining to the peace process. Would Hamas accept a two-state solution? Would it recognize a signed agreement with Israel? They said they will honor agreements provided they are consistent with the national interest. Well, how can you define national interest?

Can Hamas carry out its armed struggle agenda that it promised? Can they do that while they are a government in power? This is a real question, and I can't see how they can do that.

The key is how can Hamas transform itself from the mentality of an opposition to working out concrete plans of action and accepting accountability within a system of governance.

Conversely, can Fatah transform itself from the sole political power in Palestine to an opposition

party that has to accept relinquishing power? And can it articulate an agenda of opposition to Hamas and at the same time work to reform itself and rectify the situation of corruption and mismanagement that contributed to its fall?

Q: At this point, what are the priorities for the new Palestinian government?

Ashrawi: The decisive factor is the economy. If Hamas cannot pay salaries when they form the government, there will be a collapse. People cannot afford to have that happen; there is nothing for people to fall back on. If people go hungry, there will be chaos—not just instability, but a breakdown. And there will be violence with a spillover effect. This is crucial to understand.

Q: How do you react to *The New York Times* story that the Bush Administration wants to cut off aid and diplomatic relations with Hamas and force a collapse of government?

Ashrawi: In other words, punishing the Palestinian people collectively for daring to exercise their democratic rights. I don't see why the Palestinian people should be punished for exercising their will.

Q: Hamas says that the Muslim countries will pick up the slack if U.S. and European money is cut off.

Ashrawi: I will believe it when I see it. We have not had significant funds from the Muslim countries in a long time. Some Arab countries are helping, but they are not able to carry the whole burden. You have a civil service, you have security forces, you have to pay salaries of more than \$110 million a month. Who is going to come up with that kind of money?

Q: Hamas has suggested it will seek to form a national unity government. Do you see this as an opportunity to put together a unified front representing, theoretically, all Palestinians?

Ashrawi: What is the value of a national unity government if it is based on essential contradictions of agenda and principle? National unity, it occurs to me, emerges from an inclusive democratic system, where people agree to differ amicably, where pluralism means we can work together in the national interest without foisting opinions on each other, and where we can oppose peacefully and politically.

Q: Suffice it to say, you do not see that apparatus present at the moment?



RACHEL SALOMON

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