

New Hope for the Middle East?

Sunday's Palestinian presidential elections and the landslide victory won by Mahmoud Abbas have been widely hailed as a significant step forward to reaching a durable and just peace in the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. President Bush announced that he was looking forward to working with Mr Abbas and that the US were 'ready to help the Palestinian people realise their aspirations', Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon indicated a willingness to hold early talks on security issues, his deputy, Ehud Olmert called Abbas a 'promising leader', and the European Commission's President, Jose Manuel Barroso considered the election and its result 'a very important step towards the creation of a viable and democratic Palestinian state'. These positive views of Mr Abbas and the elections were echoed by other politicians around the world; even the leadership of Hamas, who had called for a boycott of the elections congratulated him on his victory. Virtually no-one seemed to have anything bad to say in the immediate aftermath of the elections.

Certainly, holding the elections and ensuring, by and large, their fair conduct was a significant accomplishment for the Palestinian authority, which was thrown in limbo not only by the death of its long-time leader Yasser Arafat last year (who had stood at the helm of the PLO for four decades), but also by the virtual incapacitation it had suffered at the hands of Israel over the past four years of violence which cost the lives of 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis, most of them civilians. Having failed to confront terrorists in the ranks of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to name but two of the prominent Palestinian groups engaged in violence against Israeli security forces and civilians, Israelis saw no value in either Mr Arafat or his administration. And they may have been right—the Palestinian Authority is widely seen, including by its own people, as corrupt and inefficient at best, as preying on its own people and secretly supporting violence against Israel despite public statements to the contrary at worst.

Yet Israel has also not made it easy for the Palestinians, even for those who can be considered moderates and more amenable to making painful compromises. Israel's insistence on an undivided Jerusalem as capital of the Israeli state (the endorsement of which by Ariel Sharon sparked the outbreak of the second Intifada) and on not negotiating the return to Israel of Palestinian refugees who had to leave the area in the wake of the 1948 war, may be seen as legitimate by many in Israel itself, but they do not cut any ice with the majority of Palestinians. The third thorny issue, Israel withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to enable to creation of a Palestinian state may be more easy to achieve, but without reaching a compromise on the return of refugees and on Jerusalem, it will be meaningless as it cannot secure what majorities on both sides long for—the peaceful coexistence of an Israeli and a Palestinian state.

Thus, the task ahead of Mr Abbas is a huge one. He has to reform the Palestinian Authority, confront terrorism among Palestinians, and negotiate a lasting peace with Israel. Clearly, he cannot do this by himself. Peace can only be achieved in partnership with Israel, as Mr Abbas, one of the architects of the 1993 Oslo Agreements knows from personal experience. Nor can it be achieved without the support, financial, political and otherwise, of the United States and the European Union. Crucially, Arab leaders, too, are called upon to play a constructive role. For too many years, Palestinians have been mere, and tragically all too often willing, pawns in the power games in the Middle East. Peace in this region has to be a collective effort beyond Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Peace between Palestinians and Israelis is the cornerstone of regional stability in the Middle East. Because of the geopolitical significance of this region, no-one can afford to squander the opportunity offered by the election of Mr Abbas as President of the Palestinian Authority. Many a leader in Israel and the Palestinian territories, the Arab world, Europe and the United States now have to work together to make sure that the promise of a new beginning can be fulfilled. Mr Abbas needs to be enabled to follow

through on his agenda of democratic reform and peace negotiations, and he himself must be sincere in his efforts so that gradually new trust can be built in the Middle East and that the major sponsors of the Middle East peace process can facilitate constructive negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis. As is so often the case in efforts to settle long-standing disputes, political leaders will be called upon to make tough choices and to show true leadership. Mr Abbas may just be the man to achieve this, and the world would be a better and safer place if he succeeded.