

Gervais

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

The Weapon of Democracy

RAMALLAH, West Bank

I decided that before writing about Hamas's winning the Palestinian legislative elections, I had to talk to people in the West Bank first. I am so glad I did. Everything is now clear to me: What a mess!

The new Hamas parliamentarians will be sworn in on Saturday, and nobody knows what will happen next. Fourteen of the new Palestinian lawmakers are in Israeli jails, including 10 from Hamas. That's more than 10 percent of the whole Parliament.

About the only thing that is clear to me is the radical mood of both Israeli and Palestinian voters. Consider this: Israel is holding its national election on March 28, and the rightist Likud party, led by Bibi Netanyahu, opened its campaign with ads accusing the centrist Kadima Party, led by Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, of planning to pull Israel back to the 1967 borders. The Likud quickly backed off that line, however, when it realized that so many Israeli voters today liked the idea of pulling back to near the 1967 borders that some may have thought the ad was taken out by Kadima — instead of being an attack on Kadima by Likud.

Yossi Beilin, who heads the leftist Meretz Party, opened his campaign with an ad that says: "Beilin Will Divide Jerusalem." Again, if you'd seen that ad a decade ago, you'd have thought it was a wicked libel. Today it's a campaign promise! After the failed peace process and the Hamas suicide-bombing campaign, many Israelis just want total separation from Palestinians — and a barrier.

"Ideologically, Israelis have never been more dovish," said Ari Shavit, an essayist for the Haaretz newspaper. "But that dovishness is based on the condition that there is a partner we can trust. If so, people are ready to give back everything. The overwhelming majority is now for a two-state solution. But we have become sensible at the very moment that Palestinians have lost their senses."

The Palestinians have thrown out Yasir Arafat's old Fatah Party in favor of Hamas, which wants to eliminate Israel and erect an Islamic state in all of Palestine. So just when Israel's majority comes around to two states, Mr. Shavit added, the Palestinians elect a party that favors only one.

Or have they? It's obvious that the ruling Fatah Party and its allies, led by the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, ran an incomprehensibly stupid campaign. There was no discipline, so in many districts Fatah and its secular-nationalist allies ran

four candidates, while Hamas always ran only one. So Fatah votes got divided, and Hamas ones didn't.

The result, the pollster Khalil Shikaki said, is that "Hamas won only 44 percent of the popular vote, but got 56 percent of the seats. Fatah and its allies won 56 percent of the popular vote, but only 43 percent of the seats."

Hamas was clearly elected to provide clean government and order. But it was also elected because its suicide campaign was seen as decisive in getting Israel out of Gaza, thereby bringing Palestinians a measure of dignity, which Fatah failed to do.

Israel, with U.S. backing, says it will cut off all its dealings and financial flows to a Hamas-dominated Palestinian Authority — unless Hamas renounces violence, recognizes Israel and accepts all the P.L.O.-Israel ac-

Hamas steps up, and confusion reigns.

cords. Some Israelis anticipate that a cash-starved Hamas-led government will lead to chaos, and that Mr. Abbas will then be able to call new elections.

I don't think it will be so simple.

The sense I got from Hamas officials here is that Hamas will be low-key and patient, trying to rule as long as possible without money from abroad, working on improving Palestinian governance and hoping that Palestinian society will remain steadfast — and that the Arab world and Europe will somehow intervene to keep Israel and the U.S. from depriving Hamas of its legitimate mandate.

As Farhat Assad, the local Hamas spokesman, remarked: "I thank the United States that they have given us this weapon of democracy. But there is no way to retreat now. It's not possible for the U.S. and the world to turn its back on an elected democracy."

But Hamas will have its hands full managing the West Bank, where it doesn't have as many people or arms as Fatah. As the Israeli strategist Gidi Grinstein put it, Hamas "is like a snake that swallowed an elephant." It has a lot to digest before it can move sharply in any direction.

Hisham Abdullah, the West Bank A.F.P. reporter, told me that when he went into the main bookstore in Ramallah the other day and asked what was selling, the owner said he'd noticed Hamas people buying Dale Carnegie books on management. . .