

**Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in
Palestine & Israel (EAPPI)**
**Observations of the elections for the PLC
in the Occupied Palestinian Territories**
25 January 2006



1. Background

The Palestinian Legislative Assembly is the legislative branch of the Palestinian Authority, established on the basis of the Declaration of Principles following the Oslo Agreements in 1993. It has had 88 members and has passed 75 laws since its first election in 1996.

Under the new electoral system, 132 representatives were elected through a mixed system, 66 candidates through a majority system in which 16 districts were allocated a number of seats and candidates ran independently. Another 66 candidates were elected through a proportional system in which 11 lists of candidates are given representation according to their relative number of votes. Places on the lists were reserved for women and Christian candidates.

Of the approximately 4 million Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) in mid-2005, some 1.3 million people were eligible to vote. Each voter was allowed a number of votes for the majority district vote and one vote for the proportional list. The Central Elections Committee (CEC) sent out leaflets and posters, and radio and TV spots were produced to explain the procedures to voters and encourage them to vote.

2. Summary

By accompanying and supporting ordinary Palestinians, the Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs) gained a unique perspective on the elections. The aim of this report is to give an insight into the reflections on the run up to the elections and election day itself.

The elections ran smoothly and without any major disturbances reported on election day. Each team of Ecumenical Accompaniers were asked to be present at a number of polling stations, not as official monitors, but to provide accompaniment and to show solidarity to those engaging in the democratic process. EA teams, who were located at polling stations and checkpoints across the West Bank and Jerusalem¹, reported that there was a steady stream of people going through the polling stations. Voting took place in an orderly manner. At many stations, people had gathered in large crowds from early in the morning and towards the end of the day large queues could also be seen outside stations in Jerusalem.

There were, however, many reports of campaigning still going on outside polling stations with people handing out cards and holding up placards and posters. Clear obstacles were put in the way by the Israeli authorities in the run-up to the elections, most notably in Jerusalem. Please see the Jerusalem section below for further details.

3. Voters' access to polling stations and other irregularities

Overall, the movement of voters and balloting went unobstructed. At major checkpoints, observers and Palestinians noted that Israeli forces allowed smoother passage than usual. In virtually every polling station the EAs visited, official observers were either present or it had been verified that they had been present at some point during the day.

Although all campaigning was banned on election day, party sympathisers were handing out leaflets outside polling stations and posters were attached to cars parked nearby in many sites. The CEC stated in its press conference at the end of election day, however, that a policy of toleration had been adopted in this regard, intervening only where people tried to distribute material within polling stations or to enter them with campaign material. The Fatah party was also reported to have handed out telephone cards to voters in Tulkarem.²

In at least one checkpoint in Jerusalem, Israeli forces noted ID numbers of passers-by.

¹ Please see the appendix for a list of polling stations and checkpoints covered.

² EAPPI Tulkarem team.

This related to campaign obstructions listed under (5) below.³

Voting in some Jerusalem post offices was extended for two hours after the scheduled closing time until 9pm. The reason for this, according to the CEC, was that Israeli employees in these offices had handled procedures so slowly that not all registered voters had managed to vote by the scheduled closing time. EAs in Jerusalem also reported that there were delays in the voting process in several of the Jerusalem polling stations.

4. Voters' interest in the elections and atmosphere on election day

The turnout of the polls in total was 77%, including the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, with a slightly higher turnout in Gaza than in the West Bank and with 50% of voters in Jerusalem participating.

As far as the EAs observed, most politicians, commentators and voters saw the elections as an exercise in democracy by the Palestinian people and expressed satisfaction at the smoothness of the elections process. The general mood on the street was described with words like "festival", "wedding day atmosphere" or "celebratory" by EAs, Palestinian voters and newspaper commentators. Few media reports have focused on the fact that the turnout was so high and that the day was a turning point for democracy in Palestine.

"Today is like a wedding day for the Palestinians. The whole world is watching. It is so good to see Palestinians asserting their democratic right to vote – much more than we have seen in other countries in the Arab world."

Abu Hasham, An Nabi Salih near Ramallah, 25th January.

5. Campaign obstacles from the Israeli security forces

The two main obstacles to campaigning mounted by the Israeli side were interference in the campaigning of East Jerusalem candidates and the movement restrictions inside the West Bank as well as between the West Bank and Gaza. Movement restrictions between West Bank towns have been heightened in recent weeks. For over a month now the IDF have prohibited 800,000 residents of the Tulkarem, Jenin and Nablus districts from traveling towards Ramallah and the southern West Bank.

Jerusalem during the elections run up:

With regard to Jerusalem, a number of measures were taken to obstruct the electoral process, including:

- 1) Before Jan 15, Israel had stated that voting would be barred in East Jerusalem, a direct contravention of the Declaration of Principles.
- 2) At first Israel prohibited all campaigning inside Jerusalem and detained or beat up campaigners who tried to defy this rule. Some candidates were in several instances threatened, detained, arrested, fined and beaten. This included Hanan Ashrawi (Third Way party), Mustafa Barghouti (Independent Palestine) and several Hamas candidates, as well as campaign staff. On January 15, the Israeli cabinet decided to allow campaigning and voting but with severe restrictions. For example; meetings were allowed only in private homes or indoors after approval from the Israeli authorities. Factions and candidates refused to obtain permits necessary for putting up elections posters. This led to the tearing down of posters by Israeli forces and a 500, 000 NIS fine (approximately US \$60 000) imposed on Hamas, Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).
- 3) Some candidates were barred from campaigning altogether. The Hamas party was banned from campaigning even after the Israeli cabinet decision on January 15 to allow

³ EAPPI Jerusalem team.

voting in East Jerusalem. The grounds given were that Hamas are part of a terrorist organisation.

4) Only a fraction of the voters - some 6,300 - were registered in East Jerusalem and thus allowed to vote there, and had to do so in Israeli post offices. The additional more than 100, 000 eligible voters from inner Jerusalem were forced to travel to polling stations in the suburbs. This is a clear violation of the Declaration of Principles of the Oslo Accords.⁴

5) Following Israeli security forces raids of registration offices, there were widespread fears that voting might impair Jerusalemites' possibility to keep or obtain their blue Jerusalemite IDs. These were, *inter alia*, expressed several times to EAs in the Jerusalem team.



6) It also banned the Palestinian flag and other Palestinian 'symbols' from being used in Jerusalem.



The rest of the West Bank

The other major external obstacle during the electoral campaigns, was the system of checkpoints that Israel has in place in the West Bank and the permits needed to travel from one place to another, including to the Gaza Strip. Representatives of both the Hamas party and Independent Palestine who spoke to EAs considered this a major problem for their campaigning. It was also clearly an issue for other party candidates.

A few incidents have also been reported from the Hebron district and checkpoints in the Northern West Bank, including the removing of posters and detaining candidates. However, EAs and Machsom Watch (an Israeli organization who are present at checkpoints) volunteers have reported that in the two weeks leading up to the elections, procedures at checkpoints such as Qalandiya have been noticeably improved.

Polling day in Jerusalem

⁴ For more information, please see: www.nad-plo.org. 'The Right to Vote: Palestinians in Occupied East Jerusalem'.

There were 6 polling stations (post offices) in Jerusalem: Salah El Din and Jaffa Gate, plus the Mount of Olives; Beit Hanina; Shu'fat and Ar Ram. The voting in Jerusalem was extended for two hours from 7pm to 9pm to allow those still queuing outside post offices and those already inside to complete their votes.

There were reports from local election monitors that facilities inside polling stations did not allow for privacy and that at some post offices, Israeli staff were present who were not post office employees and could view how people were voting. Some expressed the fear that they will be discriminated against depending on who they voted for.⁵ Other complaints from local monitors include:

- Movement difficulties due to the 2500 soldiers stationed around Jerusalem
- Local monitors were not permitted to go inside polling stations
- Israeli people who were not post office staff were present inside polling stations. This raised suspicions about those who had voted having their social security and health insurance cut off

EAs reported that in Beit Hanina, the facilities did not offer enough privacy and time. In Shu'fat Post Office there was no privacy whatsoever. There were reports of up to one or two hour delays in three of the Jerusalem post offices. The IDF, however, were generally not seen to be present at post offices, excluding the Salah El Din and Jaffa Gate post offices.

EAs present in the areas of Abu Dis and Bethany did not see many people crossing at these points into the West Bank. They were told several times by Palestinians that Jerusalemites were afraid that going to vote in the West Bank might endanger their ID's and entitlements to health insurance and other benefits.

6. Other campaign obstacles

Elections run up

On December 13, the Central Elections Committee closed down its operations for one day after its offices in Gaza and the West Bank had been assaulted by armed men. On December 27, armed men raided a CEC office in Jerusalem.

Elections day

Fights between Hamas and Fatah supporters were reported outside polling stations in Hebron and Tulkarem.⁶ EAs observed that in most locations, campaigning continued inside and outside many polling stations, with cards being handed out and posters put up.

7. Conclusion

Each EA team reported a lively and joyous atmosphere outside polling stations. It was pleasing to see that the day past without incident and that voters had turned out in such high numbers. Whilst the media has been focusing on Hamas' victory, little attention has been paid to the fact that to hold fair and democratic elections in a territory exhausted by military occupation is a tremendous achievement for the Palestinian people.

"[W]e have chosen democracy as a way of life [...] But democracy is like a coin; it has two sides. On one side [of the coin] is democracy; on the other side of the coin is freedom." PA President Mahmoud Abbas, May 26 2005

There is somewhat of a paradox between a nation holding fair and democratic elections when it has not gained its freedom as a state. The 'democratic' world; Israel, the EU and the USA have called for democratic elections, without applying this principle themselves; eg: immediately prior to the election we learnt that the USA had forwarded funds to Fatah candidates supporting them over Hamas. The international community, whilst

⁵ Local Election Monitoring Committee, *Al Quds* newspaper, 26 January.

⁶ *Al Quds* newspaper, 26 January.

trying to promote democracy in Palestine has been quick to condemn the results of these democratic elections. The fear is now that the Palestinians could be isolated from the international community and aid to the Occupied Palestinian Territories will be halted.

The only option would be for the Europeans and the Americans to support them (the new PLC). They talk about democracy; if this is the result of the Palestinian democratic elections, they would have to accept it.'

Nidal Abu Zuluf, Director of YMCA, Beit Sahour, January 10 2006.

Whilst we can celebrate with the Palestinians in this achievement; something many Arab countries are far from achieving, we must not be complacent until the day we can celebrate with them their freedom. This chapter of history has not yet ended and will not end until the Israeli occupation has ended. Until that day, Palestinian democracy will continue to limp along.⁷

This is an unofficial report for the World Council of Churches featuring the findings of field interviews made by 25 Ecumenical Accompaniers and EAPPI staff on and before election day and drawing on additional sources, specified below. The report was compiled by EAs: Christiane Gerstetter (Germany), Andreas Hedfors (Sweden) and Gemma Abbs, Communication & Advocacy Officer.

References

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⁷ Rifat Kassis, *Electronic Intifada*.

Appendix

Please find below a list of polling stations and checkpoints visited by each team on election day. Number of polling stations visited in each location is specified in brackets.

EA Team	Polling stations visited	Checkpoints monitored	Observations
Ramallah	A'ram, Anata (4), Hizma (2), Qalandiya, An Nabi Saleh, Beni Zeid, Gharbiyye, Jifna, Bir Zeit	Qalandiya, A'ram, Shu'fat	
Jerusalem	Jerusalem (4), Abu Dis (4), Bethany (3)	Al Buwabe, Shu'fat and Al Za'ayyem	Jaffa Gate: a small and vocal Israeli Jewish group were seen campaigning outside Jaffa Gate. MKs outside Jaffa Gate polling station. The slogans heard were aimed at ridiculing and intimidating Palestinian voters.
Bethlehem	Bethlehem (4), Beit Jala (2), Beit Sahour (2)		
Hebron	Hebron's Old City (8), including 4 in H2.	Checkpoints 61 and 56	Young men being detained at 61 and having IDs checked as they were leaving polling station.
Jayyous	Jayyous, Falamiya, Azzun (2)		All calm, no problems with voting or campaigning.
Tulkarem	Tulkarem (6)	Anapta checkpoint	Large team of Italian observers present, saw only 3 other official EU monitors. Hamas had a massive presence at all the polling stations, even bringing the mother of a Hamas guy who was killed a couple of days before by the IDF to one of the schools to persuade people to vote. Fatah supplied voters with Jawwal telephone cards.
Yanoun	Nablus, Aqraba (2)	Huwara	