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Hamas in charge

It gave the Palestinians God and hope. They gave it power.

By Beshara Doumani

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JAN. 25, 2006, marks the end of a 50-year period during which the Palestinian national movement was dominated by a secular political culture - and the beginning of a new phase of unknown duration dominated by an Islamist political culture.

The consequences are huge, not just for Palestinians but for the Middle East and for global movements of change as a whole. This is because the question of Palestine has become a fundamental symbol of the dark side of the modern condition and a weathervane for the nature of politics in the 21st century.

Hamas won 76 out of the 132 seats of the Palestinian parliament, while Fatah took only 43 seats. The final results might change slightly, but the basic picture is clear. Hamas' landslide means that it will take over most of the institutions of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. Hamas will set the political agenda for that segment of the Palestinian population living under Israeli military rule. Its victory will also bolster the position of Islamists in the Palestinian diaspora and among the Arab citizens of Israel.

It remains to be seen what effect a Hamas victory will have on the social and cultural rules of society - school curricula, personal status laws, public dress and other areas that Islamists have traditionally sought to influence.

In terms of the relationship with Israel, nothing fundamental will change, but the mask will be off. "Parliament" and "government" are words that connote a sovereignty that is absent in reality. The mantra "there is no partner for peace" has been an ironclad law of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians since the days of the British Mandate. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's version was only the latest incarnation of the phrases we've heard so often: "There are no Palestinians" is how Golda Meir put it. "The PLO is a terrorist organization" was the line of successive Israeli governments until Oslo in 1993. "We will not negotiate with Arafat" was the catchphrase of the post-Oslo era.

It wasn't really Hamas that eviscerated Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah in the elections. It was the Israeli governments that engineered the failure of the "peace process" to produce fruit, and the Fatah leadership's gluttony that blinded them to the

consequences of their own failures. Still, the Hamas victory will make it much easier for Israel to sell the "no partner for peace" line.

Elections are but a snapshot, and there are myriad factors that can skew results. But there is a larger truth: After Oslo, the daily life of Palestinians in the occupied territories has deteriorated to almost subhuman levels, largely because of Israeli policies. The best that people hope for is to keep their heads above water and pray that their society will not suffer a complete collapse. At times like these, people turn to God and to each other. Hamas has helped them to do both, and it has something to show for it.