

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Ballot Boxes and Real Choices ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

An editorial cartoon that ran in a Beirut newspaper over the weekend showed an Arab ballot box chiding a Ukrainian ballot box with the words: "You should have come to me for advice!" If you want to know how to stage a meaningless, rigged poll Arab governments are the people to ask.

The sentiment is especially timely when one contemplates the latest political machinations within the Palestinian leadership. Yasser Arafat spent the better part of two years running what little is left of the Palestinian Authority from the ruins of his compound in Ramallah. In the wake of his death there was a clear sense among the people around Arafat that the PA's legal procedures for choosing a new president had to be followed to the letter. This, it was hoped, would send a clear signal that the PA still exists as a viable governing institution (whether the PA actually *is* a viable governing institution is arguable, but that's not my topic for today). That meant an election in early January, 60 days after Arafat's death.

So a vote has been set for January 9. In the best tradition of Arab politics, however, the men who run the PA are doing all they can to guarantee that the election produces the 'right' result. Their preferred candidate is Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, a former Palestinian prime minister who had his differences with Arafat in the past but was generally seen as the old leader's anointed successor (he's also generally thought to be the preferred candidate of Israel, Washington and the European Union – though this is not necessarily a plus where ordinary Palestinians are concerned). Rallying around Abbas is being portrayed as something akin to a patriotic duty for Palestinians, the idea being that 'national unity' must be preserved ahead of any new negotiations with Israel.

Abbas was set to lead a field in which the other candidates were mostly obscure and lacked the organizational clout of Fatah, the largest of the Palestinian political factions. Arafat founded Fatah and led it until his death. Abbas, long one of Arafat's main lieutenants, was elected Fatah's head shortly after Arafat's death.

Now, however, Marwan Barghouti, a Fatah leader who probably has more popular support than the gray and bureaucratic Abbas, has entered the field. Barghouti is serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison, and the Israelis say they have no intention of letting him out. Barghouti seems to see himself as the Palestinian Nelson Mandela, and there's a good chance more than a few voters will agree.

Newspapers have spent the last few days denouncing Barghouti, a figure usually lionized in the Palestinian media. The result has been a rather sad spectacle. For all the talk of a democratic future, it's clear the old men who run the PLO have in mind a 'democracy' closer in style to Egypt than it is to Britain or the United States. Whatever one may think of Barghouti his candidacy offers the prospect of something rarely seen in the Arab World – a genuine,

competitive vote. The way the old guard has reacted to this prospect is hardly a good sign as they struggle to come to terms with an Arafat-free future.

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