

Barghouti Out ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

So, the next Palestinian Authority president will not be selected in a real, competitive election after all. Earlier this week Marwan Barghouti pulled out of next month's contest to replace Yasser Arafat. His move clears the way for Mahmoud Abbas's ascendance to the post. A number of other candidates remain, but none have the name recognition, street credibility or organizational clout that is lined up behind Abbas (who is commonly referred to as Abu Mazen).

A lot of people are going to be happy, or at least relieved, at this development. In addition to being the candidate of the Palestinian old guard, Abbas is generally regarded as the preferred choice of Israel, the United States and the European Union. It was he who negotiated the Oslo accords more than a decade ago. He has long favored a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, denounces violence and backs negotiations. He is generally thought to regard the four-year old intifada as a disastrous mistake.

Had Barghouti stood in the election and won the Palestinian landscape would have been very different. Barghouti is a generation younger than Abbas. He is a leader from inside the Occupied Territories, as opposed to one of the people around Arafat who spent decades in exile before returning to Palestine after the Oslo signing. Like Abbas Barghouti favors talks with Israel. Unlike Abbas he advocates continuing attacks on Israelis, believing that only the constant threat of violence will make Israel approach the talks seriously. Barghouti is currently serving five life terms in an Israeli prison. Had he won the election Israel and the West would have faced the prospect of a popular, elected Palestinian leader -- someone with genuine democratic legitimacy -- who Israel (and not a few people in the West as well) regarded as a bloodthirsty monster. To call this situation awkward would be an understatement.

But imagine, for a moment, that Barghouti had stayed in the election and then lost. Abbas' victory would probably have been narrow, but assuming, for the sake of argument, that it was generally perceived as fairly won it would have strengthened his hand immeasurably. He would have won an election against a real opponent -- something hitherto unheard of in the Arab world. The victory would also have been seen as a mandate for a policy of talks with the Israelis and an end to violence. Few things could have done as much to move the process forward. As it is, Abbas' now more-or-less inevitable victory will be seen as nothing more than the sort of 'election' we see all the time in the Middle East. When it comes time to make hard choices, and to tell the Palestinian people, as well as the broader Arab world, hard truths Abbas' position will be significantly weaker.

The old guard, Israel and the West have all won. Whether the victory is real or pyrrhic remains to be seen.