

Abbas' election gives Israeli-Palestinian peace talks a chance

By RAVI NESSMAN
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RAMALLAH, West Bank — Mahmoud Abbas was elected Palestinian Authority president by a wide margin Sunday, exit polls showed, giving him a decisive mandate to renew peace talks with Israel, rein in militants and try to end more than four years of Mideast bloodshed.

The victory of the staid and pragmatic Abbas, who has spoken out against violence and has the backing of the international community, was expected to usher in a new era, after four decades of chaotic and corruption-riddled rule by Yasser Arafat who died Nov. 11.

"We, the Palestinians, are drawing our future with our own hands. We will be the symbol of democracy and freedom," said Aya Abdel Kader, 45, a lawyer voting at a Gaza City school.

Abbas, popularly known as Abu Mazen, has promised to reform the Palestinian Authority, overhaul the

unwieldy Palestinian security services and quickly resume negotiations with Israel, stalled for four years.

However, his political objectives are the same as Arafat's: a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, and a solution for Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

After results of three exit polls were announced — giving Abbas between 66 percent and 69.5 percent of the vote — his supporters celebrated in the streets. In the West Bank city of Hebron, motorists honked horns and waved Abbas posters. In Ramallah, gunmen fired in the air.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon expects to meet with Abbas soon, his aides said. Israeli officials said that in a gesture to Abbas, Israel plans to release some of the more than 7,000 Palestinian prisoners, provided Abbas stop militants from firing rockets at Israeli towns.

"I think this vote shows a change in the 'Palestinian street' moving away from support of violence, said Sharon aide Raanan Gissin.

"We certainly welcome this and hope that from this mandate Abu Mazen will lead the Palestinian people on the path of reconciliation," he added.

Polls were open for 14 hours. The election, the first presidential vote in nine years, proceeded largely without interruption. In one incident, gunmen fired in the air in an election office and in Jerusalem, voters complained of confusing arrangements.

Final results were to be announced Monday morning.

According to three exit polls, Abbas' main challenger, independent Mustafa Barghouti, won 20 percent, while the remaining five scored in the low single digits.

Barghouti complained that the Central Election Commission had changed rules in mid-game, by extending voting by two hours and by allowing voters to cast ballots at any location, rather than where they lived or registered.

Analysts have said Abbas needs at least 60 percent support to resume

negotiations with Israel. "He (Abbas) has a mandate from the voters," pollster Khalil Shekaki said of the exit polls.

However, Abbas faces a lengthy list of challenges. He must balance between Israel's demand to crack down on militants and his efforts to co-opt the gunmen. A major attack on Israel could undermine his credibility and sour peace hopes.

Major militant groups have indicated they are willing to halt attacks and give him a chance. However, the Lebanese guerrilla group Hezbollah, which funds some of the Palestinian militants, is trying to undercut Abbas, according to people close to the group.

Earlier this week, Hezbollah-funded gunmen with ties to Abbas' ruling Fatah movement killed an Israeli soldier in a West Bank ambush. On Sunday, Hezbollah carried out a deadly cross-border attack. An Israeli soldier, a French U.N. observer and a Hezbollah fighter were killed in the confrontation.

The Palestinian election came a day before Israel's parliament was to approve

a new, more moderate coalition, seen as a boost for a planned Gaza withdrawal. In the new alliance, Sharon will govern side-by-side with elder statesman Shimon Peres, leader of the moderate Labor Party, and an architect of interim peace deals with the Palestinians. Sharon has talked of restarting the long-stalled "road map" peace plan and coordinating his Gaza plan with Abbas.

President Bush has said a resumption of peace talks must be accompanied by sweeping Palestinian reforms. Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking on CNN, praised the vote as a "moment of opportunity for both sides."

The Israeli army eased travel restrictions for the vote, witnessed by hundreds of foreign observers, including former President Jimmy Carter and former French Premier Michel Rocard.

Many gunmen followed rules barring weapons in voting stations, but in a sign of the difficulty the new president will face in controlling them, Zakariye Zubeidi, a militant leader, refused to give up his M-16 assault rifle when he

walked into a polling station in the West Bank town of Jenin.

Fearing a low turnout, the Central Election Commission kept the polls open two extra hours, until 9 p.m., citing logistical problems.

One election official said the move came amid heavy pressure from Fatah, which was concerned a low turnout could weaken Abbas.

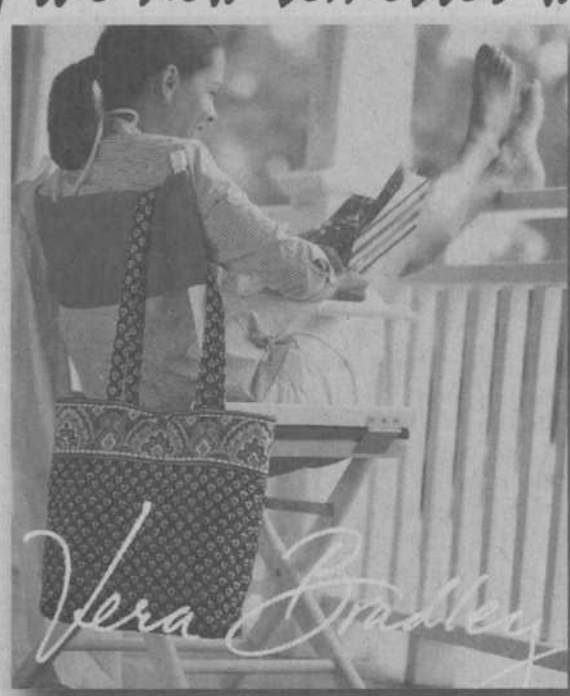
In Jerusalem, Palestinians and international observers complained of confusion over registration lists, and Palestinians accused Israel of trying to intimidate them.

By prior agreement with Israel, only about 5,000 of 120,000 eligible voters in Jerusalem — a city both sides claim as their capital — were permitted to vote in post offices in the city. The others had to vote in suburbs.

Backed by Fatah's formidable machine, Abbas was nearly assured of victory well before the vote when his toughest competition, jailed uprising


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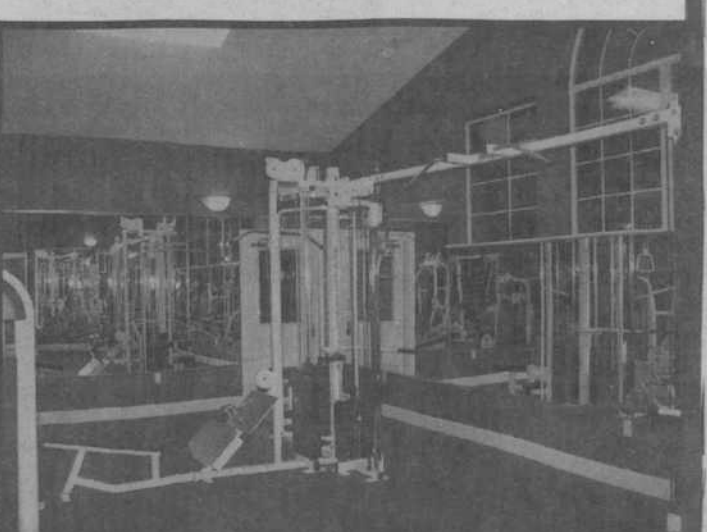
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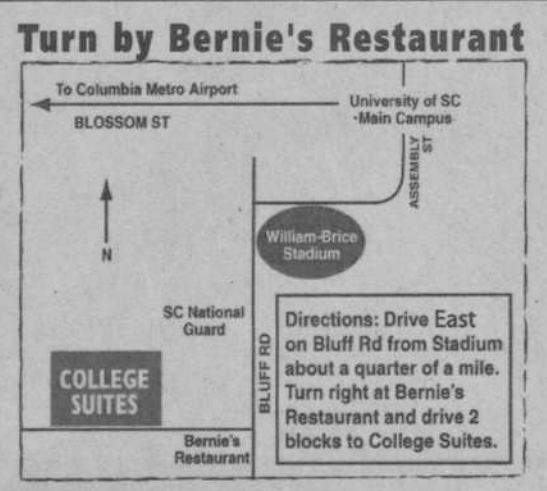
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