

ISLAMIST GOVERNANCE HAMAS STYLE

Readings from the Palestinian experiment in Islamic democracy

av
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Abstract

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This study investigates how the Palestinian Islamists in Hamas came to govern following their success in the 2006 parliamentary elections. The study poses the overarching research question: *How can Hamas's governance in the Gaza Strip between 2006 and 2012 be characterised and understood?* Hamas has attracted particular research interest, partly due to its seemingly contradictory nature and actions, and partly due to the fact that this was the first case of Islamists in the Arab world to ascend to power by democratic means. On the one hand, Hamas has led an armed struggle against Israel which has even included suicide bombings against the Israeli civilian population. On the other hand, Hamas has more recently shown both the will and the ability to participate in electoral processes in a peaceful and democratic fashion.

As a result of this, the case of Hamas relates to two scholarly debates in particular. The first debate concerns the nature of Islamism - whether Islamist ideals can be considered fully compatible with democracy. Ultimately, this debate has come to focus on what the democratic potential of Islamists would mean in practice, should they get the chance to hold power. The second debate concerns the nature of Hamas - how to comprehend the paradoxical conduct of this actor and in what direction it is heading politically. There is also a strong extra-scientific relevance to the study, as Hamas remains a powerful force in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. How Hamas is dealt with, both by Israel and the international community and by the Palestinians themselves, will have repercussions on when and in what shape the pending Palestinian state will materialise.

Based on existing scholarship on this subject, the aim of this study holds theoretical, methodological and empirical ambitions: Theoretically, the study seeks to contribute to the two debates mentioned above. Methodologically, it seeks to contribute by suggesting a new framework for the analysis of Islamist governance. Empirically, it contributes by adding a new case study to the existing research on Islamists in power.

The study addresses the research question by focusing on how the new government perceived and reacted to three key challenges to its exercise of power: relating to the political system and the main opposition party; countering violent radicalisation and local splinter groups; and re-establishing societal order and reforming the legal system. The analysis is based on a recently collected set of primary data consisting of both observations and interviews. The respondents include ministers, advisors and civil servants in the government, as well as military commanders, internal security personnel and members of the Qassam Brigades. They also include some of the Hamas government's fiercest critics, notably Salafi-Jihadis, youth dissidents and members of the Fatah party.

The study finds that the Hamas government lacked the necessary organisation, knowledge and experience to carry out its duties. It also finds that the government perceived itself to be subjected to an imminent threat of being overthrown. The study shows that while the Hamas government was far from fulfilling the democratic promises it had set out in its reform programme, it did not proceed to change the political system into any sort of Islamic theocracy governed by sharia. As the analysis concludes, Hamas's governance could be characterised neither as singularly authoritarian and Islamic, nor as merely democratic and secular. Rather, Islamist governance Hamas style has been a blurred combination of all these traits together, firmly guided by a far-reaching ideological pragmatism and a continuously perceived necessity for further power consolidation.

Keywords: Hamas, Islam, Palestine, Gaza, govern, liberal, demo, sharia, jihad.