

# Strong Islamic Sentiment Drives Arab Elections

By DAVID RUDGE

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The northern faction of the fundamentalist Islamic Movement retained its firm control on Umm el-Fahm - the only place it officially fielded a list and candidate for the mayoralty - in local elections that were otherwise marked by fragmentation in the Arab sector.

The movement's candidate in Umm el-Fahm, Sheikh Hashem Abdel Rahman, won 75 percent of the votes compared to around 23% for Said Agbariya, who headed a coalition of predominantly secular political groups.

The unity list, composed of Hadash (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), its rival Balad, the radical Sons of the Village movement, and the Progressive National Alliance of former MK Hashem Maharmeed, also failed to make any major inroads on the city council.

The absence of the movement's northern branch leader and former Umm el-Fahm mayor, Sheikh Raed Salah, who is standing trial for alleged offenses against the state with four other senior members, including his successor to the mayoralty Dr. Suleiman Agbariya, did not have an effect.

"I said before that these elections would be a litmus test for the Islamic Movement," said Dr. Elie Rekhess, director of the Konrad Adenauer Program on Arab Politics in Israel at Tel Aviv University's Dayan Center.

"The results in Umm el-Fahm show that the northern branch of the movement has not lost any of its support. In fact, Sheikh Rahman won the same percentage of the vote as did Salah when he last ran for the mayoralty.

"This is a significant result for the movement and continues the tradition established in 1989 when Raed Salah was first elected mayor. It also represents a vote of confidence by residents for the way the movement has been running the city," said Rekhess.

The Islamic Movement also had a good showing in Nazareth, the largest Arab city in the country with some 70,000 residents, around 60% of them Muslims.

The mayoral candidate of the movement-affiliated United Nazareth List, Ahmed Zouabi, was narrowly defeated by incumbent mayor Ramez Jeraise of Hadash, who won just over 50% of the vote.

Hadash, however, failed to win outright control of the city council, gaining eight of the 17 seats, with the movement also getting eight and the Balad Party of MK Azmi Bishara earning just one seat.

Nevertheless, Hadash supporters said the party had only been a few hundred votes short of winning a ninth seat and that Jeraise's position had been strengthened, bearing in mind he also faced competition from a Balad mayoral candidate and a former Hadash stalwart, Suheil Fahoum, who headed an independent list.

"The result is very similar to what happened in the 1998. elections, when the movement's candidate came to within 2% of defeating Jeraise and its list won 10 of the then-19 city council seats and Hadash got nine," said Rekhess.

"The latest result is an expression of strong Islamic sentiment in Nazareth and shows that this is not a passing phenomenon," he told *The Jerusalem Post* on Wednesday.

The demolition, by court order, of illegal works on the proposed Shihab e-Din mosque, opposite the Basilica of the Annunciation, apparently played a part in the election campaign.

Rekhess said thousands of leaflets were distributed in Nazareth with caricatures depicting Jeraise as a bulldozer knocking down the mosque, even though the demolition was carded out by the Interior Ministry because the construction contravened building and planning laws.

Most places, however, were characterized by fragmentation, factionalism, and a resurgence of tribalism and voting along ethnic and religious lines.

Rekhess said these phenomena were reflected in the plethora of candidates for mayoralities and heads of local councils, and the huge number of lists vying for council seats. This, in turn, led to an unprecedented high number of places - some 17 in all - where second-round runoffs will have to be held.