

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Secretary Clinton Lauds Palestinian Institutional Reforms.....	1
Midterm Elections Determine Control of U.S. Congress	1
Americans Can Vote Early, Use New Technology in Midterm Elections	3

Secretary Clinton Lauds Palestinian Institutional Reforms

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Institutional reforms being made by the Palestinian Authority are “building a new reality” and adding to outside confidence in Palestinian self-governing capabilities, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says.

Speaking October 20 to members of the nongovernmental organization American Task Force on Palestine at a Washington hotel, Clinton said that given recent institutional reforms by the Palestinian Authority (PA), “it is easier than ever to envision an independent Palestine able to govern itself, uphold its responsibilities to provide for its own people, and ensure security.”

Clinton noted that in a September 16 assessment, the World Bank stated that should the PA maintain “its current performance in institution-building and delivery of public services, it is well-positioned for the establishment of a state at any point in the near future.”

A two-state solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is “essential to the future of the Palestinian people,” Clinton said.

Under the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, Clinton said, the PA is “reversing a history of corruption and working hard to produce results that matter in Palestinians’ daily lives.”

“The streets are safer, courts are handling more cases, taxes are being collected more efficiently. In the first half of this year, revenues were 50 percent higher than in the same period in 2009,” Clinton said.

Palestinians are seeing continued economic growth, with more than 100 new West Bank companies being registered in August alone, and offering “everything from venture capital funds to local hardware stores,” the secretary said.

More Palestinians are finding jobs, and the economic and security improvements are attracting more tourists and business travelers, Clinton said.

The Obama administration has contributed to the improvements by investing nearly \$2 million to upgrade and reopen the Jalameh crossing with Israel. The project has improved the economy of Jenin by facilitating travel, spending and shopping by Arab citizens of Israel. It has also worked to increase the flow of commercial goods and construction supplies into Gaza, which has allowed Gaza

City’s wastewater treatment plant to be modernized and Gaza’s electrical power distribution to be upgraded.

The United States helped sponsor the Palestine Investment Conference in Bethlehem earlier in the year. It generated \$655 million in private investment pledges targeting high-growth sectors in the PA, Clinton said.

While acknowledging that economic and institutional progress are necessary steps, she said, “The legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people will never be satisfied until there is a two-state solution ... ensuring dignity, justice and security for all.”

An independent state will give Palestinians the freedom to travel, do business and govern themselves. “Palestinians would have the right to chart their own destinies at last. The indignity of occupation would end and a new era of opportunity, promise and justice would begin,” Clinton said.

The Obama administration will not turn its back on the people of Palestine or the people of Israel, she said, and it has not given up in its efforts to encourage direct talks to end the conflict.

“We are working every day, sometimes every hour, to create the conditions for negotiations to continue and succeed. We are urging both sides to avoid any actions that would undermine trust or prejudice the outcomes of the talks,” she said.

Thanks to organizations like the American Task Force for Palestine that advocate a “just, lasting and comprehensive peace,” Clinton said, it is easier to see beyond the “false choices” of the Middle East conflict. The organization opposes violence, advocating a peaceful end to the Middle East conflict through the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

“Being pro-Palestinian does not mean you must reject Israel’s right to exist. And being pro-Israel does not mean you must deny the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people.” Clinton said. “The path to security and dignity for both peoples lies in negotiations that result in two states living side by side in peace and prosperity, and a comprehensive peace in the entire region.”

Midterm Elections Determine Control of U.S. Congress

By Bridget Hunter
Staff Writer

Washington — On November 2, Americans will cast their ballots to determine who will represent them in the 112th

Congress, scheduled to convene in January 2011.

These elections, because they occur in even-numbered years at the halfway point of a presidential term, are known as midterm elections. This timing encourages pollsters and political pundits to view the outcomes as referendums on the policies of the current president, but that narrow interpretation can distract from their true importance.

In electing a new Congress every two years, American voters decide who will speak for them in crafting legislation, determining government spending and overseeing the activities of the executive branch. The Congress is the legislative branch within the three-pronged federal government. The others are the executive branch, led by the White House, and the judicial branch, headed by the Supreme Court. Each has a separate but equal role in governing the nation. As laid out in the U.S. Constitution, each branch checks and balances the powers of the others.

The U.S. Congress comprises two chambers: the Senate, to which members are elected for six-year terms; and the House of Representatives, whose members serve two-year terms. A U.S. president is limited to two terms, but there are no limits on how many terms a member of Congress may serve.

Each November of an even-numbered year, every one of the 435 House seats is filled by the will of the people, as expressed through the ballot box. Simultaneously, approximately one-third of the Senate is also elected, although that number varies from election to election because senators sometimes retire or die in the middle of their terms. In 2010, 37 senators will be elected or re-elected.

FAMILIAR CONCERNS, NEW VARIABLES

As in every U.S. election, a variety of factors affects voters' decisions. In 2010, the economy will be a major concern, as the nation and world emerge from one of the most serious financial crises since the Great Depression. Voters are worried about unemployment, home foreclosures and taxes. They also are nervous about their retirement funds and the financial burdens — both personal and public — they might pass on to their children and grandchildren.

In 2010, "Independents" — voters not affiliated with either the Democratic or the Republican Party — are a growing component of the electorate, a development that has siphoned members away from each party. A CBS Television/New York Times poll released in April reported that 42 percent of Americans now identify themselves as Independents.

The rise of the tea party movement, which advocates limited government power and reduced government spending, has drawn voters away from the mainstream Republican Party. In some cases tea party-supported candidates have defeated well-established Republican candidates in primaries.

Another factor in 2010 races is the so-called "enthusiasm gap." Political observers say that the high interest, especially among younger voters, during the 2008 campaign that culminated in the election of Barack Obama as president is not evident in 2010, at least among Democrats. Republicans, especially the tea party element within the party, seem to be more enthusiastic about the 2010 contests.

There has been much speculation in the media about whether 2010 will be a "wave" election, one that washes away a large number of those currently serving in Congress and switches political control in one or both chambers. Recent wave elections occurred in 2006, putting the Democrats in control of the House of Representatives, and in 1994, sweeping the Republicans, led by Georgia's Newt Gingrich, into power.

Early polls suggested 2010 could be another wave, but more recent data suggest races are tightening. Two weeks before the elections, Republicans are cautiously optimistic about gaining control of the House of Representatives, but Democrats seem likely to retain control of the Senate.

Such an outcome would create a "divided" government in Washington, with one political party controlling the White House and the other controlling one or both chambers of Congress. That situation can make it more difficult to pass legislation but, conversely, can force greater compromise to break political logjams.

In the wake of the Watergate scandal of the Nixon administration in the mid-1970s, Americans seem very comfortable with creating divided governments, perhaps distrustful of empowering the federal government too broadly. Since 1968, only during the Carter administration and the first two years of the Clinton administration has the same party controlled the executive and legislative branches.

STATE AND LOCAL

As important as the congressional races are, they are a tiny fraction of the total number of elected posts U.S. voters will fill on Election Day.

At the state level, 37 governors will be elected, selections particularly important because in 2011 the once-in-a-decade process of redistricting the seats in the House of Representatives will occur. The governors elected in 2010

will play significant roles in determining how the boundaries of congressional districts are redrawn in light of the 2010 census data.

State legislators also will be chosen in many states on November 2, along with county executives, mayors, and city and town council members. Many jurisdictions also will elect attorneys general, treasurers, comptrollers and even judges.

The winners of these local races, although they lack the prestige and national import of congressional service, likely will have stronger effects on the day-to-day lives of their constituents as they serve out their terms, many working for small salaries or even without pay.

From emergency services like police and firefighters to the more mundane matters of trash collection and road maintenance, local governments are front lines of U.S. government and perhaps the purest expressions of American democracy.

Americans Can Vote Early, Use New Technology in Midterm Elections

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — As the U.S. midterm elections approach, Americans have more options than ever in deciding how and when to exercise their right to vote.

More than 3 million people already have cast their ballots, and voting will continue in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia and U.S. territories through November 2.

All U.S. voters long have had the right to request an absentee ballot with a valid reason — such as travel or physical incapacity — for not going to the polls on Election Day. But now, in a substantial expansion of that right, voters in 32 states and the District of Columbia may vote early without needing a reason.

Early voting has increased dramatically in recent years. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of voters who cast their ballots before Election Day increased from 20 percent of votes cast in 2004 to 30 percent in 2008.

Political experts say that as more states adopt early voting laws, voters become more comfortable with exercising that option. Thus, pundits predict at least one in three voters will cast a ballot early for the November 2 elections.

Early voting generally is conducted on the same voting equipment as that used in the regular election, in contrast

to absentee voting, which typically is done with mail-in paper ballots. The time period for early voting varies from state to state, but most often it is available during a period of 10 to 14 days before the election and generally ends on the Friday or Saturday immediately preceding the election.

Early voting has not benefited one party over another, experts say, and most doubt the rise in early voting will affect the outcome of midterm races because early voters tend to be more strongly partisan and thus unlikely to be swayed by late campaign events or debates. However, some voters probably like the convenience of early voting and the ability to avoid long lines and electioneering by campaign workers.

Election Day is not a national holiday, which means most voters must go to work or school that day. Others prefer voting by mail because they can take their time researching the issues while completing their ballots. Early voting also allows the 1.4 million military members stationed overseas, their 400,000 dependents and millions of other American citizens living abroad to cast their ballots. People in these categories previously could cast absentee ballots but now have more options to record their vote.

The increase in early and absentee voting has created new challenges for campaigns. Campaign managers might need to implement strategies earlier that had been used to make the case to undecided voters in the final two or three days before Election Day.

FEDERALISM AND ELECTIONS

As in many nations around the world, the administration and operation of U.S. elections is decentralized.

Under the U.S. Constitution, powers are divided between the federal government and the state government. This system, called federalism, reserves to the states any authority not specifically assigned to the federal government.

The federal government sets national standards for the fair conduct of elections, but the process by which citizens cast ballots — such as voting equipment, polling places and the hours polls are open — is set by individual states.

VOTING METHODS

States are responsible for deciding which method voters will use to cast their ballots. For example, voters in Oregon passed an initiative mandating all elections be decided by mail-in ballot. In other states, designated officials are responsible for deciding what type of voting technology to use at polling stations.

Political experts say paper ballots, the only voting technology available during the first 100 years of American voting, are still frequently used. But paper has been joined by increasingly high-tech options:

- Mechanical lever machines allow a voter to choose candidates listed on a posted ballot by pulling a lever for each candidate choice. A counting mechanism records the votes and poll workers read the numbers – in front of witnesses – when the polls close.
- Punch cards let a voter mark choices by punching holes in a paper computer card that is fed into a computer reader to record the vote.
- Optical scanners, technology used for decades to score standardized tests, provide voters with a paper form and special writing instrument to fill in a box or oval or complete an arrow for each candidate choice. A computer reads and records the marks.
- Electronic voting, or direct recording electronic (DRE) technology, allows a voter to choose candidates from a ballot posted on the voting machine or displayed on a computer screen. Voters make choices by pushing a button or touching the screen, then pushing a “vote” button to store the vote on a computer.

ONLINE VOTING

To make the convenience of electronic technology available to all overseas voters, President Obama signed into law the MOVE Act – the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act.

Signed in October 2009, this law requires the states to send out absentee ballots at least 45 days before a federal election so they can be returned in time to be counted, and to provide electronic means for requesting and sending absentee ballots.

Consequently, in November’s election, 33 states and the District of Columbia will offer some form of Internet voting to their overseas citizens. About half of these will allow fax or e-mail return of ballots. In these cases, an absentee ballot can be requested, sent out, voted and returned all on Election Day, making voting easier for many of the estimated 6 million U.S. citizens living abroad.

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