



## FIRST PERSON Putting Democracy into Action

**A young man seizes the chance to get involved in the democratic process**



Photo: Garrett Dorer, Tamkeen

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Ahmad Al-Azzeh, a 25-year-old Palestinian from the West Bank, had never cast a vote in his life. Too young to participate in the first presidential election eight years ago, he was eager to make up for lost time as Palestinians took to the polls to elect a new leader on January 9, 2005.

Starting at 7:00 a.m., when polls opened across the West Bank and Gaza, Ahmad spent 17 hours watching history unfold as a volunteer non-partisan observer. It was also his first time exercising his right to vote.

“This day gives me hope for the future of my country,” he said. “It was my opportunity to contribute to the emergence of democracy, and I seized it.”

Ahmad was one of over 100 domestic observers that received training from USAID on how to mount election observation campaigns — from the basics of training and fielding monitors to the complex procedures that should be observed. Using what he learned, he transferred his skills to other young people in his hometown by recruiting, training and leading a team of nine observers at polling stations across Bethlehem.

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Once ballots are counted, observers are asked to sign off on the final results, essentially agreeing that there was no wrongdoing. This prevents political candidates from raising frivolous accusations if the final count is not in their favor. “In this way, election monitoring helps create respect and legitimacy for the voting process and the results,” Ahmad explains. “Imagine if there were no observers. Then everyone would accuse others of cheating!”

“What I live for is to see my country free and my people living normal lives in peace and security,” says Ahmad. By exercising his right to vote and volunteering his time as an election observer, he feels he contributed to that goal.

He is also committed to getting more youths engaged in the democratic process. “Young people have to be involved. They have the vigor, enthusiasm, and potential to create change.”