

Elections in Israel

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On March 28, 2006, David Makovsky and Ziad Asali joined Dennis Ross on PBS's Charlie Rose Show to discuss Israel's parliamentary elections. Mr. Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute. Mr. Makovsky is director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Institute. Dr. Asali is president of the American Task Force on Palestine. The following is a transcript of their remarks.

DENNIS ROSS

Israeli voters went to the polls today to elect a new parliament. These are the first elections since the Israeli pullout from Gaza and Ariel Sharon's incapacitation earlier this year. The Kadima Party, led by acting prime minister Ehud Olmert, is ahead in the polls.

While Olmert's party is in the driver's seat to put together the next government, he will now need to work with other parties to form a coalition. The election has been called a referendum on Olmert's initiative to shape Israel's borders by 2010. . . .

David, I just said that in effect this election was a referendum on what Israel's future borders would be, what would happen with the West Bank. How do you explain such a consequential election should be marked by what is a relatively low voter turnout?

DAVID MAKOVSKY

I think there are a few factors. First, you had Ehud Olmert himself, who gave a speech saying that with his lead in the polls, this election has already been decided. So people said, well, then, why vote? Second, it's the fourth time Israelis have been going to the polls in seven years. I think there's a little voter fatigue.

Third, you didn't have charismatic figures like you've had in the past, whether it's an Ariel Sharon or an Yitzhak Rabin. And I think all those things together, and I would say maybe the last point, people didn't think war and peace hung in the balance. But yet it is indeed a very consequential election.

DENNIS ROSS

And it is interesting that they may not have had that perception; somehow there was a kind of comfort level with where things were headed. And they voted, and in a way, it certainly looks like there are a set of implications from this. What do you see those implications being?

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Well, I think basically, it all derives from Olmert himself, who basically took a position. He could have had an easy, what I would call the Mona Lisa candidate, smiling at everybody. But basically, he broke from Israeli tradition, which is to be ambiguous, not to alienate potential constituencies and said look, if you are voting for me, these are the things I'm going to do in office. And a lot of the critiques of people who've made territorial concessions is there's no mandate, you've never had a referendum, you've not been elected on these ideas. Olmert decided he was going to go forward based on these policies. He took a hit in terms of the total votes, but I think the 31 seats he does have are now more consequential, because people know exactly what they are getting.

DENNIS ROSS

All right, so let's take a look at this a little bit more closely. Yes, he has roughly 31, 32, could be a little higher, could be a little lower. These -- we have to emphasize -- these are still polls. We don't have the actual results yet.

But there is an interesting set of implications, are there not, in terms of the kind of coalition that could be put together?

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Yes. Basically, what is interesting here is that the right-wing parties who came out against Olmert's ideas in a very unambiguous fashion, the most you could -- after you slice and dice -- the most they could get is around 50, 51 or so seats out of 120. In other words, they don't have a veto power to block Olmert in fashioning a center-left coalition.

I think he has a range of options, but the key is that the right, if they would have pulled another 10 seats or so, they could have forced him into a center-right approach and basically tied his hands from pulling out from most of the West Bank. But they didn't garner that sort of support.

DENNIS ROSS

Well, let's take a little closer look at this. I mean, there is a reality here, as you just said, that there isn't a center-right coalition that could block him. He is in the driver's seat, as we said before, but when he is in the driver's seat, he still has other people he has to contend with. Now, what does this coalition look like, A? B, how much of a mandate does he really have to pursue the kind of plan he was talking about publicly? And C, what does it mean in terms of pursuing separation, and how quickly might it be pursued?

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Well, Olmert himself has laid out a kind of a sequence, saying that first, he would offer the new Palestinian government to basically -- to change its stripes and to -- not accept Hamas' ways to destroy Israel and engage in negotiations. Then he said he would engage in a dialogue with different segments of Israeli society. In other words, that disengagement is not his first choice, but I think these other steps could go fairly quickly if it's clear there's no negotiating alternative.

I assume he will try to put together a government with the Labor Party, with Meretz. With some of the religious parties...

DENNIS ROSS

Like Shas.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Like Shas, Agudat, which is ultra orthodox, but yet have not been against joining him.

Basically, the only parties that he -- I don't see him working with are the Settler Party on the right, and the Likud, if it remains under the leadership of Netanyahu, who -- Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of the Likud, who fared very poorly and said disengagement was dangerous for Israel.

But I think he has a lot of options, and the month of April I think will be largely taken up with him fashioning some sort of coalition based on the options he has.

I think there's only one point I want to make on a philosophical plain that I think gets people to understand what he represents and what this election is about. You know, the fact that this party, even though it didn't win 36 seats, 31, the point is, it won the most of any Israeli party.

This party didn't exist a few months ago.

DENNIS ROSS

That's extraordinary.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

And it's unprecedented in Israeli election that a party would come from nowhere and come in first. And I think what it really, on a philosophical level, represents is somewhat a rejection of solutions on left and right. The belief on the right was the status quo was tenable indefinitely. You could have settlements, you could have no violence, you could have it all. You could have prosperity.

The view on the left was you could reach a negotiated peace with the Palestinians tomorrow morning.

I think the Israeli public believes that it's gone through so much, that neither right nor left solutions actually work.

It went for Olmert, as I understand it, because it wanted a borders party. I wasn't a peace party, but it basically said, OK, give up whatever it is, 92 percent of the West Bank, but create borders for Israel. And that 92 is close to the Clinton 95 that you worked on.

DENNIS ROSS

What is interesting when I take a look at this is that fundamentally, there's a consensus in Israel, and it's reflected in this election. When you add up in a sense all the votes center left, what you come up with, as you put it, is a borders party. But what in fact it reflects is a sense that we want to be done managing, controlling, occupying the Palestinians.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

That's right.

DENNIS ROSS

And if it means that we're going to get out of most of the West Bank, we're prepared to do that.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

That's right.

DENNIS ROSS

And we want a government that is prepared to say not only that they will do that, but they'll actually act on it.

Now, that was part of the appeal of Sharon. He set this in motion by getting out of Gaza. And it does create what I consider to be a kind of interesting irony. We now have an Israeli body politic that is saying, we want to be done with the Palestinians. We don't want to control the Palestinians. We don't want to occupy the Palestinians. We're prepared to get out of their lives.

And on the other side, we have a new Palestinian government about to be formed, which wants to be seeing the end of Israel. Not just -- they don't want separation from Israel; they don't want Israel to exist.

Now, Ziad, we're in a situation, we have a new Palestinian government. How will a Hamas-led government look at what has just emerged in Israel, from their standpoint? Is it in their interests? Is it not their interests? How do they approach it?

ZIAD ASALI

Well, Hamas victory was an inward-looking statement by the Palestinian people about what is happening inside their own country. They were opposed to the Palestinian Authority and to Fatah more than they were for anything else. So it does not really involve questions of the generous settlement that is expected between Israel and Palestine.

The Palestinian people figured out that Abu Mazen and his accommodation policy did not get a whole lot for them. So they said we might as well clean out our own house.

Now, Hamas is in a position to reassess itself, its own policies, own stated policies. Whether it wants to agree with the international consensus, the Arab League, the binding agreements of the Palestinians themselves, with the international community and with Israel, or whether it wants to pursue an independent course.

Now, it is up to the both parties now to figure out if Hamas can indeed offer any kind of an accommodation that would be acceptable to Israel before Israel goes on in its unilateral approach.

DENNIS ROSS

Let's take in a sense what David was saying before. David was saying that Olmert has talked about a sequence.

ZIAD ASALI

Yes.

DENNIS ROSS

In the first instance, he is going to give negotiations a chance. He'll talk internally, but he will give negotiations a chance.

Now, Hamas isn't interested in a negotiation with Israel. Abu Mazen is interested in a negotiation with Israel. But for the Israelis to give negotiations a chance, they are going to have to perceive in Abu Mazen that he has something to offer other than only words. Can he deliver something? If he goes into a negotiation, especially with a Hamas prime minister, a Hamas interior minister, if he goes into negotiations, how does he do it? Can he actually deliver what it is he says?

ZIAD ASALI

This has been the challenge for Abu Mazen in the past there. The fact that he really took very advanced positions, very courageous positions that cost him internally as well as with constituencies that he lost afterwards. But he was not able to deliver as much as he wanted or as he could have, perhaps some people say, because he did not have the tools. He has always asked for more in terms of Israeli concessions on checkpoints, on releasing prisoners, et cetera. And he asked for more financial aid, to give to the people something, to show that moderation in fact does pay off, and he asked for more in terms of military support.

He did not feel that he received any of the above.

At one point in time, Israel as well as the United States have to decide whether there is enough in and around the office of the president and the presidency, which is still in power to negotiate internationally on behalf of the Palestinians, as head of the PLO, not just the Palestinian Authority, to build up this basic core of governance able to deliver something for peace.

If we are going to continue isolating Hamas, as it is, and isolate also Abu Mazen, it's going to be very hard to arrive at any kind of a solution.

DENNIS ROSS

All right, David, what Ziad is suggesting in effect is that you don't impoverish the Palestinian people, you put Abu Mazen to the test. In some ways, he suggests you put Hamas to the test as well. We now are going to have a new Israeli government. It will take a little while to form it, but it's going to be based on a center-left coalition. How do you think that new government is going to approach the Palestinians in general? How will they deal with Hamas, how will they deal with Abu Mazen or not deal?

DAVID MAKOVSKY

I think in the Middle East, you have too much history, too little geography. These people live cheek by jowl, almost on top of each other.

And therefore, the key is I think a center-left coalition led by Ehud Olmert, is going to find a way to deal with Mahmoud Abbas, Abu Mazen, the president of the Palestinian Authority.

But as you point out, Dennis, I mean, they'll boycott Hamas the government. And it's not just Israel. It's the quartet -- that's the United States, the European Union, Russia, the U.N. -- have put forth three conditions. You know, disavow the calls for Israel's destruction and disavow violence and recognize past agreements.

So I think it's not here just Israel. We're talking about the whole world, and I think those -- that's -- those are the right conditions, and I think the approach should be help the Palestinian people without helping the Hamas government. And it's not easy, but for Ehud Olmert to walk that line between kind of containment, if you will, on one side of Hamas and on the other side not to get into an all-out war of confrontation. Because he needs a policy towards Hamas which is consistent with his view of getting out of most of the West Bank. If the Palestinian Authority collapses, then Israel is going to get sucked in everywhere in the West Bank and Gaza. I'm not saying it's going to be an easy line to walk, but I think this idea of trying to find ways on the humanitarian level and other ways to help the people without dealing with Hamas unless it meets the quartet, the international community's conditionality, to me that makes sense.

DENNIS ROSS

There is an interesting circumstance, I think, where both sides have an interest in calm for their own reasons. Where Hamas has an interest in calm to be able to try to deliver on its promises, but to have calm Hamas also has to prevent others from carrying out attacks against the Israelis.

Today there was a Katyusha fired out of Gaza. That crosses a new threshold, because it has a very different kind of range. Israel won't sit back. A new government won't sit back. They'll act to preempt. So it's not enough for Hamas to say they want an extension of the calm. Hamas is going to have to act in a way in which they demonstrate they're going to do something to preserve the calm, not just talk about it, act against it.

Now, if they do, do you see some potential for a de facto arrangement? Maybe not explicit discussions between the Israeli government and Hamas, but some kind of indirect dialogue and some kind of de facto set of understandings

between the two?

DAVID MAKOVSKY

If they stop the Islamic Jihad and they stop the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and other factions that are engaged in terror, they are going to ultimately have to explain that to their people. And that will mean a modification of policy.

I just have my doubts that they're going to do that, but if they did that, I'm sure that will be recognized by the Israeli side. They'll see something here has changed.

But I think the odds are, they won't. And therefore, it could be where these two parts kind of all fit together is that because of this Katyusha in Gaza, you could see a situation where Israel will get the settlers out of most of the West Bank, 90 plus percent of the West Bank, but leave the Israeli army there so long as there's a threat that Hamas might rocket Israeli urban cities -- urban areas, the way we've seen the continual Kassam rockets coming out of Gaza.

So I think -- but the army's deployment there clearly is going to be much lighter if it doesn't have to protect --

DENNIS ROSS

-- If it doesn't have settlements to be protecting --

DAVID MAKOVSKY

-- 60,000 settlers on every single road. So it's going to be a different phenomenon.

DENNIS ROSS

I want to focus in the last couple of minutes that we have remaining on the issue of unilateralism. In a sense, unilateralism is somewhat of a misnomer here. What it refers to is that the Israeli government isn't planning to negotiate a withdrawal with the Palestinians -- unless, of course, there's a Palestinian partner that they see. But they do plan to negotiate something with the United States and the international community. They want something in return. They may not believe they can get anything from the Palestinians, but they want something from the United States.

Now, I want to ask you, David, what is it they want from the United States? And I want to ask you, Ziad, what is it -- how would the Palestinians react to what it is that the Israelis would be seeking?

DAVID MAKOVSKY

First, I think you are right, Dennis. I mean, the fact that the Israelis will be pursuing this unilateralism is not because it's desirable, but because it's what's feasible, because they believe Hamas is not open to a bilateral solution, and Hamas' victory in that sense kind of bolstered Kadima, because people said there there's no partner.

What they want from the United States to be under the kind of headline it takes more than one to be unilateral. They are going to clearly want a set of understandings from the United States that the settlers that live between what's called the green line, the 3/67 boundary and the barrier, that's about 8 percent of the West Bank where 193,000 settlers live. That if Israel gets all the settlers out of the wrong side of the barrier, then 90-plus percent, that they will be able to preserve the block settlers inside the fence. And then Olmert could say to his public, I got you Sharon's vision.

DENNIS ROSS

We just have about a minute left, so I'd like to hear from Ziad Asali.

ZIAD ASALI

I think one of the problems is that Israel has not found a partner that it really could deal with, from Arafat to Abu

Mazen now to Hamas. That is perceived as the Israelis not wanting to see a partner amongst the Palestinians.

The other is taking a unilateral position, especially on borders and especially also on Jerusalem, cannot possibly lead to peace, because the borders that are suggested and taking Jerusalem out is not a formula for accommodation. It could be a forced formula that will last for some time. And here is the question that the Israelis have to ask: Do they want to end this conflict or do they want to hunker down and build themselves a fence to live around or a wall?

So I think the Palestinian as a people, as a people, want to have a solution that is based on a two-state solution. This is not something that is negotiable, even by the election of Hamas. To consider any of their representatives as non-partner and not promise to have them have the ability to produce real partners is very detrimental to both people.

DENNIS ROSS

Well, I think at this stage, there's a couple of things that could be done. One thing that could be done in fact is that if there's a de facto set of understandings, that creates a whole different climate for thinking about negotiations, number one.

Number two, whatever it is the United States might negotiate with the Israelis, at the same time they do that they should be talking to at least Abu Mazen, to say, look, we're going to be going down this road unless you can deliver something. If you can deliver something to show you can live up to your obligations and responsibilities, we can produce a negotiation. If not, there will be political borders. They may not be an international border, but they will be political borders. ❖

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