The Shape of Israel's Election Race

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

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Brief Analysis

In a surprise move prior to Israel's March 28 election, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert unveiled a proposal that Israeli settlers be consolidated into West Bank settlement blocs largely adjacent to the Green Line. A week after the announcement, Israeli public reaction suggests his gamble seems to have paid off. According to a Yediot Ahronot poll released on March 17, Israelis favor Olmert's unilateralist proposal by a margin of 52 percent to 45 percent. Moreover, Olmert's poll standing was not negatively impacted by the proposal, despite the fact that it could mean the removal of an estimated 60,000 settlers from dozens of settlements scattered across the larger part of the West Bank outside Israel's security barrier. (Inside the Israeli security barrier, there are approximately 193,000 settlers, mostly in blocs, in the 8 percent of the West Bank largely adjacent to the pre-1967 boundaries. By comparison, President Clinton's final proposal in 2000 involved Israel keeping 5 percent of the land.) An Olmert security advisor and former Shin Bet head, Avi Dichter, says the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) will not be withdrawn from the West Bank.

Olmert was able to use his commanding lead to answer critics who say that the new party leader lacks Ariel Sharon's track record and therefore the authority to ask the public to trust his decisions. In the March 17 poll, Olmert's Kadima stood to win 39 seats in the 120-seat Knesset; Labor was polling at 19 seats and Likud, 15 seats. Olmert's standing was undoubtedly assisted by Israel's March 15 operation to seize from a Jericho prison the assassins of Israeli cabinet minister Rehavam Zeevi. Olmert hopes the operation will burnish his security credentials and undercut Netanyahu's argument that he is uniquely tough enough to challenge Hamas. (Olmert needs to be concerned about the 22 percent of Israelis who are undecided -- the equivalent of twenty-five Knesset seats.)

Hamas and the Israeli Elections

Public opinion polls have been remarkably stable since the start of campaigning in December, despite such tumultuous events as Sharon's massive stroke and Hamas's victory in January elections to the Palestinian parliament. Some pundits predicted that Likud's support would rise sharply in polls amid growing fears over Hamas, a major theme of Benjamin Netanyahu's campaign. However, in the absence of major terror attacks like the bombings that turned the 1996 campaign on its head and led to Netanyahu's narrow victory, there have been no major changes in the polls. Moreover, Netanyahu's polling negatives seem to be strong, offsetting any potential gains. This may be due to bad memories of the Netanyahu premiership or anger among some of his erstwhile low-income supporters at austerity budget cuts during Netanyahu's recent tenure as finance minister. Netanyahu will claim that

he should receive more credit for an economy that surged despite the violence in 2000-2004.

Moreover, the Hamas victory seems to have reinforced the public's sense that it is illusory to believe that the Palestinians will become peace partners in the near term, and therefore they are looking askance at Likud and Labor's preferred method -- negotiations. Likud believes in the principle of negotiations, but believes they must be put off indefinitely due to Hamas; Labor believes negotiations should be explored with non-Hamas elements now. However, much of the public believes the models of the left and right have shattered and that peace with the Palestinians is not possible at the moment, but also thinks that the status quo is not demographically and economically viable for Israel's national interest. These voters are receptive to Olmert's principle that the absence of partnership means that Israel should act unilaterally.

According to Olmert, if Israel does not act unilaterally in its interest, it is making itself hostage to the irresponsibility of the other side and turning 60,000 settlers into human bargaining chips. Yet the divide between Olmert and Netanyahu on the issue of a unilateral pullout is so profound that Netanyahu says he cannot join a government led by Olmert with this idea as its centerpiece. Therefore, unless a third-place showing at the polls leads to Netanhayu's departure as head of Likud in favor of former foreign minister Silvan Shalon, who is friendly with Olmert, the Netanyahu declaration seems to ensure that Kadima's top junior coalition partner will be Labor.

The Rise of Avigdor Lieberman and Russian Immigrant Sector

The steadiness of the polls among the three big parties masks the fluidity among smaller parties and distinct sectors of voters. A possible surprise of the election campaign is Avigdor Lieberman of the Yisrael Beitenu ("Our Home Israel") Party; Yisrael Beitenu has tripled its standing to the point where it could win twelve seats in the Knesset. The interest in Lieberman, a former top Netanyahu aid who now leads Yisrael Beitenu, stems from the prospect that he could join a Kadima-Labor coalition. Lieberman immigrated from Moldova in the late 1970s. He seeks to project himself as a Sharon-like strongman figure who is sympathetic to concerns of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Lieberman is hoping that his new platform will broaden his appeal. Unlike in past elections, Lieberman -- a settler -- says a Palestinian state is inevitable and the focus should no longer be on preventing the formation of such a state, but rather a population and territorial swap that gerrymanders Israeli Arabs into the Palestinian state. He believes this controversial idea has appeal among non-Russian voters. Lieberman's focus on civil marriages has also helped to rally support for Yisrael Beitenu.

Lieberman is hoping to capture immigrants from the former Soviet Union, whose votes are now in play. These immigrants, who have left the former Soviet Union since 1990, now make up no less than 15 percent of the electorate and can potentially control some eighteen seats in the Knesset. Since the 1992 election, their votes have been indispensable for every winning party. As a voting group, the former Soviet immigrants are hawkish and strongly secular. They are not satisfied with the quality of Israeli education and believe in a presidential system of governance and in civil marriage. Economically, they are split between an emerging middle class and the elderly poor. However, two of their favorite politicians have suddenly disappeared.

Polls show the immigrants overwhelmingly loved Sharon, whom they viewed was a strong leader in the Russian tradition. (It didn't hurt that Sharon found ways to be interviewed by Moscow-based satellite channels that beamed the interviews to immigrants in Israel. Sharon would often reminisce in Russian about his mother, Russian native, who loved Russian literature even while living on a collective farm in Israel.) They also took to the anticlerical, middle class Shinui party led by Yosef (Tommy) Lapid, who has since quit politics. Labor has had a very difficult time courting these voters, who identify party leader Amir Peretz as espousing the socialist economic policies that they opposed in the former Soviet Union (and the Russian media in Israel have jokingly compared his mustache to Joseph Stalin's). Advisors to Peretz urged him not to waste resources in a hopeless appeal to former Soviet immigrants.

Polls show that Yisrael Beitenu has the support of a plurality of immigrants from the former Soviet Union; Lieberman's party stands at 27 percent, against 22 percent for Kadima, 10 percent for Likud, and 19 percent undecided. Lieberman is now considered a realistic partner for an Olmert coalition. Olmert has sought to court the Russian vote by having his nephew Yair tell Russian audiences that Ehud's mother came from the Ukraine and father from Samara.

The Arab Sector

The Arab sector may be 20 percent of the population, but it has not translated its numbers into political influence. This is due to a variety of reasons: fractious politics, focusing on Palestinian nationalism rather than working with Zionists to improve daily life, and relatively low turnout (63 percent in 2003, compared to a higher turnout until the late 1990s). Another factor that could complicate Arab influence is a new law that raises the threshold of electoral politics. Israel has now raised the minimum support that must be won in order to enter the Knesset from 1.5 percent to 2 percent of all voters. A seat that took 47,000 votes to win in 2003 is estimated to take close to 80,000 votes to win in 2006. This could hurt the Arab sector, which is plagued by infighting; polls show only the communist Hadash Party safely over the threshold, with two others on the brink: the Islamist United Arab List and the secular nationalist Balad Party.

In the current Knesset, the Arab parties hold eight seats, but there is a distinct prospect that a sizable number of Arab votes could be wasted in this month's election. This would also be likely if more Israeli Arabs vote for Jewish parties out of dissatisfaction with the performance of the three Arab parties. Three of Labor's top twenty seats go to Arabs, and party leader Peretz is hammering away at meat-and-potato economic issues that have appeal to Arab voters. According to pollster Rafi Smith, Labor is poised to gain two seats from disaffected Arab voters. At the same time, some wonder if the Islamist list will exceed electoral expectations on the heels of Hamas's victory and the radical Islamist leader sheikh Raed Shalah's decision to lift his prohibition on voting in Israeli elections.

The Jewish Religious Sector

The three Jewish religious parties stand to garner twenty-five seats, according to polls. Two of the three parties -- Shas and United Torah Judaism (UTJ), which respectively constitute the Sephardic and Ashkenazic wings of ultraorthodox Jewry in Israel -- are capable of joining an Olmert government, even if it forms a coalition with Labor. (The National Religious Party-National Union, which views itself as the primary political platform for the settlers, could not join a center-left government.) However, the past has shown that joining such coalitions is an exercise in mutual expediency that tends to be ephemeral given the hawkish roots of the religious voters. Unlike the past, when the religious parties held the balance of power in a highly polarized political environment, the convergence of Israelis around the center has diluted their power. The religious parties are no longer feared, but they are courted. Politicians believe religious parties lend a patina of authenticity and legitimacy.

Moreover, highly religious communities have a myriad of religious educational institutions that depend on the state for support, making the religious parties more amenable to the blandishments of coalition funding. The past has proven that just because they may bail out later because they disagree with the leading party, there is no reason why they should not gain tangible benefits for their institutions in the short run. Therefore, religious parties that start out with Olmert might not remain with him as he seeks to implement a policy of disengagement. As soon as the prime minister yields land of biblical patrimony, religious parties will bolt as Shas did after the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, the National Religious Party (NRP) did as Israel headed to Camp David in 2000, and as the NRP did after Sharon's government passed Gaza disengagement in 2004. Yisrael Beitenu also bolted over disengagement in 2004.

Conclusion

While it is conceivable that Olmert could establish a coalition of more than eighty Knesset members (bringing

together Labor, Yisrael Beitenu, Shas and UTJ), the main question is whether he will retain a "policy core" of at least sixty-one members who will remain with him when his West Bank disengagement plan hits obstacles and the religious parties (and perhaps Yisrael Beitenu) head for the exits. It should be no surprise that Olmert is warning voters against complacency to ensure that Kadima does not become too dependent upon potential junior coalition partners that do not share its policy vision.

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