Israeli Elections Results:

Assessing Implications

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Brief Analysis

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon swept to victory yesterday, his right bloc assured of at least 67 seats in the incoming 120-seat Knesset. Indeed, Likud's strength has essentially doubled, rising from 19 seats in the fifteenth Knesset to 37 seats in the sixteenth. The right's gain was matched by the left bloc's steep decline. The Labor and Meretz parties, which ruled the roost in 1992 with 56 seats, lost more than half their seats, with Labor winning only 19 and Meretz taking a mere 6. The centrist Shinui party made a big splash, advancing from 6 to 15 seats on its platform of reshaping religious-secular relations in the country. Below are some observations on the significance of the election results and prospects for coalition formation.

Sharon's Victory

The victory provides a personal vindication for Sharon, making him the first Israeli incumbent to be reelected in twenty-one years. There were many factors acting against Sharon. With Israel deep in a recession and unemployment skyrocketing, he had virtually never broken beyond a 20 percent approval rating in terms of economic performance. Terrorist attacks continued. Not least among all these factors were the scathing personal and party financial-scandal allegations, which he has denied, but which still marred his campaign.

The fact that Israeli voters rallied to Sharon and Likud despite these obstacles provides important insights into the current Israeli societal thinking, most significantly, its commitment not to deal with Yasir Arafat or negotiate under fire. It is no coincidence that of the just-elected members of the Knesset, 85 have opposed negotiations with Arafat. This was one of the most significant issues dividing Likud and Labor in their campaigns. As the polls showed, Labor leader Amram Mitzna's willingness to negotiate with a Palestinian leader that even President George W. Bush has refused to deal with was simply too difficult for an angry and disillusioned Israeli public to swallow. Mitzna's adamant refusal to correct course in response to the lessons of the 1990s only further disappointed a public resolved to move in a new direction. The elections confirm that the Israeli public puts a premium on crisis management (i.e., fighting terrorism), believing that a complete resolution of the crisis (i.e., peace negotiations) is not attainable due to the Arafat factor.

The election results are also a testimony to Israelis' high prioritization of a unity government. The two most

successful parties in this election, Likud and Shinui, both campaigned under the banner of a government unified in facing the current crisis. Mitzna's repeated commitments (during the campaign and reiterated even in the immediate aftermath of his defeat) not to join a Likud-led government failed to resonate among a public clamoring for unified leadership. Down the road, this may prove to be a prescient strategy, but it has had very costly short-term consequences.

Shaping a Coalition

Once again at the helm, Sharon now faces the challenge of building a coalition. The question he must ask himself is where he wants to go beyond fighting terrorism. (He has said that he is committed to Bush's June 24, 2002, speech calling for a provisional Palestinian state.) Sharon must shape a coalition of parties that will provide sufficient flexibility in achieving that mission. In his victory remarks, Sharon pledged to form the broadest possible government. The unity government he campaigned on, however, may be difficult to attain. At present, there are roughly four options for coalition formation:

1. A unity government (Likud and Labor). This will be Sharon's first stop, as he tries to reconstruct the pre-November 2002 unity government using the war with Iraq as a rallying cry. In his concession speech, however, Mitzna reiterated his intention to retain his position as Labor chairman and to lead the political opposition, believing that Labor's cooperation with Likud over the last two years muted Labor's ability to critique these policies. Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who some had suspected might take over as Labor chairman, is unlikely to consider an unconditional reunion with Likud anytime soon either, since it is he who led Labor out of the unity government in November. If there is a ray of hope for Sharon, it shines from Shimon Peres, who in the aftermath of defeat hinted at inviting Likud to make a counteroffer that could be used in rallying some Labor supporters toward unity. Such an offer might involve a compromise on settlements, which only Sharon, as architect of the settlements plan, could legitimize. Yet, this would require Sharon to pay a price to the political right, something that he feels is politically painful and thus premature given the lack of peace prospects.

2. A Likud-Shinui government. If his attempt at a unity government with Labor fails, Sharon will likely move to Shinui as his second-best bet for a coalition. Its leader, Tommy Lapid, has already indicated an interest in participating in a Likud-led government, but he would likely require Sharon to confront the religious elements of the right bloc (e.g., Shas and United Torah Judaism) over potential reform of ultraorthodox welfare benefits.

3. A secular government (Likud, Labor, and Shinui). Joining with Shinui may be Likud's only means of convincing Labor to join a coalition. In this case, Sharon could build a fairly strong secular unity government to the exclusion of most other right-bloc parties. This seems unlikely as Sharon would have to make double the costly concessions—to Labor on the issue of settlements and to Shinui on the domestic religious front.

4. A narrow right government. This would be Sharon's last option and also his easiest. Sharon may have to stick with the more religious right-wing parties that held up his previous coalition after Labor left. In the wake of the elections, however, the right is no longer so narrow, retaining as many as 67 seats in the incoming Knesset, plus three more seats from the Am Ehad trade union party. This may provide Sharon with the leverage he needs to maintain control of the government at least temporarily while he waits for the Iraq crisis to run its course. Such a government would also likely take action against Arafat (exile or otherwise) should that become necessary in a post-Iraq crisis period.

Implications for the Future

Sharon needs to assess whether or not it is premature to establish a broad coalition that can act on the mandate of the greatest possible number of Israelis. Even if he starts off with a narrow right coalition, he will eventually have to make some compromises to move beyond that if he is to make significant progress toward reinvigorated peace negotiations in a post-Saddam and post-Arafat environment. In what is likely to be his last term in office, seventy-

four-year-old Sharon is well-positioned to take measures that he otherwise might not have in obtaining the support he needs to make a lasting difference in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

If he exiles or takes other action against Arafat, Sharon may seek to garner at least tacit U.S. support. Yet, given the present stage of engagement with Iraq, this is hardly at the top of the U.S. foreign policy agenda. Indeed, even outside of the current Iraq crisis, there is little incentive for the Bush administration to push forward on peace negotiations that, even in optimal conditions under the Clinton administration, nevertheless failed. When Sharon goes to Washington in March, the flexibility and backing of his coalition will be essential to his success in getting U.S. support behind the Israeli position. At present, however, there are too many "ifs" to make a judgment on how Sharon's coalition choices may affect Israeli relations with its American ally.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lauren Gottlieb.

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