

Israel Goes to the Polls: An Election Preview

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Brief Analysis

On January 24, 2003, Elie Rekhess and David Makovsky addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. Rekhess is a senior associate at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University and director of the center's research program on Arab politics in Israel. Mr. Makovsky is a senior fellow at the Institute and contributing editor to U.S. News and World Report. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ELIE REKHESS

The current election campaign cannot be discussed without considering the wider context. Since 1999, relations between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs have deteriorated to an unprecedented low. In October 2000, thousands of Arab Israeli demonstrators took to the streets in an unexpected wave of violence that killed thirteen protestors and injured dozens of Israeli policeman. The clashes were the result of three factors: the Palestinian intifada, which intensified Israeli Arab solidarity with the Palestinian community; Islamic fundamentalism; and dissatisfaction with widening socioeconomic gaps. The situation has deteriorated further since then, and Israeli Jews have reacted to the Israeli Arab community with feelings of fear, shock, and anxiety. In March 2002, Ma'ariv polls revealed that 65 percent of Israeli Jews considered Israeli Arabs a security threat, while only 30 percent believed that Israeli Arabs were loyal to the state. Moreover, Jews began to avoid contact with Arab communities, further exacerbating the economic crisis. Israeli Arab involvement in terrorist activity contributed to anti-Arab sentiments as well.

For their part, Israeli Arabs feel a growing sense of exclusion and delegitimization, and several recent events have only solidified these feelings: the decision to revoke the citizenship of Israeli Arabs involved in terrorist attacks; a recommendation by Israel's security forces to outlaw Islamic movements; and the Central Election Committee's decision to disqualify Knesset members Azmi Bishara and Ahmed Tibi (a decision ultimately overturned by Israel's Supreme Court). Given this context, many wonder whether Israeli Arabs will go to the voting booths during next week's election. Prior to 2002, Arab turnout was traditionally high, nearly equal to the Jewish electorate. In 1999, for example, 76 percent of the Arab community voted, a number perceived as a sign of Arab integration into Israeli politics and an endorsement of the legitimacy of Israel's parliamentary system. In 2002, however, this trend was

dramatically reversed, with Arab voter turnout dropping to 18 percent. This boycott was mainly a protest against Ehud Barak, who had garnered 95 percent of Arab votes in 1999.

Currently, various radical, ultranationalist, and secular movements (e.g., Sons of the Village and the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement), along with certain independent intellectuals, are advocating another boycott. Some reject Knesset participation from an ideological standpoint. This view is articulated most strongly by Islamists, who advocate separatism and support the creation of autonomous institutions to replace the Knesset. On the pragmatic level, many Arabs feel that voting is a waste of time regardless of the number of Arab seats in parliament. In the past, Arab Knesset members have proven ineffective and divided. Moreover, they have been unsuccessful in creating an atmosphere conducive to joining a coalition and have thus been marginalized.

The Israeli Arab public is deeply disappointed. Each election campaign, the Arab sector repeats itself: division, frustration at the ensuing weakening of the Arab electorate, and ineffectiveness. This year's elections are no exception: nine Arab incumbents are leading eight parties on four separate lists. Accordingly, the Arab public is tired and skeptical, doubting the motivations of Arab politicians. Indeed, boycott is a very real possibility, illustrating the deep erosion of Jewish-Arab relations. In this respect, the election results may represent a significant turning point in an issue that will increasingly become a major challenge for Israel in years to come.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Why Is Sharon Winning?

Ostensibly, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon should be in political trouble due to several factors: a recent vote-buying scandal; continued suicide bombings; a sharp economic downturn, including a shrinking gross national product and an unemployment rate over 10 percent; and the popularity of some aspects of Labor rival Amram Mitzna's platform. Despite these problems, however, Sharon is on a path to victory, which would make him the first Israeli incumbent to be reelected since 1981. His success is due to a variety of factors.

According to pivotal segments of the Israeli electorate, progress toward peace is up to the Palestinians, not Israel, and thus is not a function of Israeli diplomatic initiatives. According to the monthly Tel Aviv University Steinmetz Center poll, the number of Israelis who believe that peace with the Arabs is not possible has doubled over the past three years (33 percent in 1999, 63 percent today). Moreover, eighty-three projected members of the Knesset share this sentiment and have asserted that they will not deal with Yasir Arafat. Such lack of faith in the peace process may result in apathy at the polls and a fatalistic resignation to the status quo.

Although peace is deemed impossible, many believe that security is achievable, which is why Sharon was elected in 2001. Sharon's "strongman" image plays especially well with Russian immigrants, who now constitute one-sixth of Israel's total population. This year marks the first time that the majority of Russian Israelis will vote for an incumbent party; although some 55 percent supported Labor's Ehud Barak in 1999, 79 percent currently support right-wing parties and only 5 percent support Labor.

Although Mitzna's position on settlements and the need to withdraw from Gaza and at least parts of the West Bank are mainstream ideas, many Israelis feel they need a right-wing approach to this left-wing policy. In other words, the manner in which such a deal is brokered is no less important than the result itself. Israelis are haunted by the reaction to their withdrawal from Lebanon and do not want violence to become a negotiating tool.

As for the vote-buying scandal, Likud voters' antipathy toward cultural elites has helped to limit the consequent political fallout. Forty-eight percent of these voters think that both Likud and Labor are corrupt, 59 percent think that most politicians are corrupt, and only 20 percent think that Likud is more corrupt than Labor. Moreover, following the interruption of Sharon's nationally aired press conference attacking Labor, Likud generated a popular backlash by claiming that the media was controlled by cultural elites and by criticizing the judge who ordered that

the broadcast be cut off because it violated Israeli campaign rules.

Mitzna's Problems

In the long term, Mitzna's decision to forswear participation in a Sharon government may be seen as an act of great courage and a successful political gamble. In the short term, however, it is backfiring, and the question is whether he will be able to remain in his leadership position following the election. His gambit turned off centrist voters, who have shifted their loyalties either to the centrist Shinui or to the right. Moreover, the move has not helped Mitzna to consolidate the left as he had hoped. In general, many fence-sitting Israelis feel that Labor has not internalized the lessons of the 1990s; to them, the party is on autopilot at time when the Bush administration has turned on Arafat. Labor has also been unable to rally the immigrant vote, not just because of this constituency's hawkishness on security, but also because the party failed to follow through on its 2001 campaign promises regarding civil marriages.

Explaining Shinui's Success. Unlike the Arafat problem, Israelis feel that they can make short-term progress on the religious-secular debate. Traditionally, Israelis have grappled with two overarching issues: Israel's survival and Israel's character. Since 1967, the religious-secular issue has been subordinated to survival, with territory becoming the defining issue of Israeli politics. Recently, however, peace has begun to seem unattainable, and cultural issues have therefore regained saliency. In this context, Shinui (Hebrew for change) has spread its appeal beyond the antireligious to encompass the suburban middle class. Israel's sharp economic downturn has allowed the party to tap middle-class resentment toward the ultra-orthodox community's lack of burden sharing in the army, the workforce, and taxpaying. Shinui's growth also reflects the sense among swing voters that neither the right nor the left bloc of Israeli politics has the solution. The left has not internalized the fact that Arafat is irredeemable as a peace partner, while the right has not internalized the demographic implications of occupation. Thus, many who vote for Shinui simply do not believe that either of the major parties knows the road to peace.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Merissa Khurma and Katherine Weitz.

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