

As Mitzna Chooses, Labor's Prospects Recede

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Brief Analysis

Earlier this week, Israel's Labor Party leader Amram Mitzna announced that he would not look to resume a broad coalition government with the Likud Party following the country's upcoming January 28 election, a crucial decision that dropped Labor from 24 to 20 seats (according to today's Yediot Aharonot poll) and that may have sealed the election for Likud. Mitzna's decision halted Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's slide of the last several weeks in the wake of a vote-buying scandal that imperiled his electoral bloc's grip on a Knesset majority.

Yet, Mitzna may well have anticipated the consequences of his decision, fully aware that it could end his electoral prospects but believing that a defeat under a certain set of circumstances could best position him and his party to exploit events in the year ahead. Indeed, some press reports have suggested that Mitzna's move was made with this aim in mind. Indeed, no alternative explanation makes sense in light of the fact that Labor's left electoral bloc is trailing the right so significantly. According to today's Yediot poll, the Likud-led right electoral bloc stands at 63 seats, the Labor-led left electoral bloc stands at 37, and the Shinui-led centrist bloc stands at 18.5 (with the remainder undetermined). In theory, a combination of the center and left blocs would narrow the right bloc's lead to a perhaps surmountable 63-to-55-seat margin. Yet, because Shinui has declared that it would not participate in a coalition with certain elements of the Labor-led bloc's far-left fringe, the actual seat tally generated by a center-left combination would be significantly lower. Therefore, Mitzna's only path to power is to configure a broad-based coalition. Foregoing that option in advance is akin to electoral suicide because it scuttles the prospects of attracting floating voters who are fence-sitting between the big blocs.

Traditionally, Israeli elections center on the pursuit of a rather narrow set of potential floating voters. Proclaiming support for a broad-based government is usually popular at times of crisis and even more so for these select voters, most of whom attach enormous importance to the question of which party stands at the helm of a broad-based coalition. Indeed, past victories of Labor candidates associated with the political center (e.g., Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak) were due in no small measure to crossover Likud voters.

A Counterintuitive Strategy

Mitzna's counterintuitive strategy seems to be based on a variety of factors, primarily that a short-term electoral defeat makes the most long-term electoral sense. That is, he may sense that the number of potential floating voters in the current electoral environment is finite, and that Labor could therefore make only limited inroads into the

Likud's lead. Because his electoral chances seem doomed anyway, the question has become how best to position his party and himself under these circumstances. Mitzna likes to consider himself a "marathon man," someone who has a long-term view of Israeli politics and who, if he handles the situation correctly, could be ideally poised to take advantage of a pendulum effect in the aftermath of a defeat. Specifically, Mitzna seems convinced that a narrow Likud victory is bound to be a Pyrrhic one.

Mitzna believes that Sharon's popularity stems from Labor's strategy of emphasizing a grand coalition over the past two years instead of serving as a vocal opposition bloc. According to this argument, Labor has suffered in the public imagination because many Israelis view the party as an echo rather than an alternative. That is, after being in a coalition with Likud for two years, Labor is not well placed to critique the very policies it has been party to during this period. Specifically, Mitzna believes that his party's approach has insulated Sharon from potential domestic and American pressure on the Palestinian issue while preventing Labor from reaping the political benefits of public discontent over the state of the Israeli economy, which has undergone a sharp downturn and is expected to decline further as the violence continues. The net result is that Labor has not benefited as much as it should have from Sharon's declining popularity. Although Likud's numbers decreased by 12 seats over a six-week period (40 seats to 28) before rebounding slightly this week (to 32.5), the Labor-led left bloc gained only 2 seats; most of the Likud's losses were redistributed within the right electoral bloc.

Hence, Mitzna's conclusion seems to be that Labor's only chance of making further political gains is to stay outside of any Sharon government, therefore ensuring that Sharon—not Labor—is blamed if the violence and economic decline continue over the next year. In other words, Labor's ultimate vindication depends on conditions in Israel getting worse before they get better. In this context, Mitzna attributes Shinui's phenomenal electoral gains (from 2 seats several years ago to 15 in the latest poll) to the party's abstention from any government that includes the religious party Shas. According to this view, voters will reward a party that is faithful to its ideas and does not sacrifice principle for expedience.

Consolidating the Left

Mitzna's strategy of ultimate vindication is predicated on his ability to position himself to reap the benefits of such an approach. In other words, Labor can lose the election, but he must have a respectable showing as a leader. Because Mitzna is foregoing the floating voters, he must compensate by seeking a redistribution of the left bloc's votes to bring up Labor's numbers. Some pundits claim that Labor's share of the bloc's 37 seats is in the 24-to-25-seat range, but so far the party's high-water mark in Yediot polls is last week's 22. Many assume that if Mitzna does not do well in the election, he may be vulnerable to rivals (e.g., former defense minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer) who would seek his post-election removal. Therefore, Mitzna must consolidate the left to shore up his internal standing. Indeed, a report in today's Ha'aretz asserted that the Labor leader is doing just that: "Mitzna 'the leftist,' instead of moving right, to the center, is moving ever leftward." Specifically, Mitzna hopes to take more votes from Labor's secular left Meretz by attacking Sharon and by stepping up the number of visits he has made to Arab towns, reminding them of his record as a Haifa mayor who has worked for Jewish-Arab reconciliation. Although Mitzna likely still hopes to at least marginally expand the overall seat tally of the left bloc (perhaps by nibbling at Shinui's numbers), his main focus now appears to be increasing Labor's share of the bloc.

It is too soon to assess whether this new strategy will pay the requisite electoral dividends. Moreover, Mitzna has reason to be concerned about whether his control of Labor is strong enough to stave off post-election public pressure calling for emergency participation in the Sharon government. Sharon will probably be conducting coalition negotiations throughout February, and the possibility that these negotiations may well coincide with a U.S. invasion of Iraq would only add to the climate of crisis inside Israel. The prospects of such a scenario may help explain today's poll numbers showing that 57 percent of all voters and 46 percent of Labor voters do not believe that Labor would

stay out of a Sharon government.

Regardless of the inevitable cynicism toward promises made by politicians in the heat of an election battle, all evidence suggests that Mitzna is a purist who believes in the philosophy that he espouses. For example, despite public pressure both within and outside Labor pointing to the obvious electoral gains that could accrue from disavowing potential negotiations with Yasir Arafat, Mitzna has steadfastly refused to make such a pledge when pressed (although he has called the Palestinian leader "irrelevant" at times). Hence, there is reason to take Mitzna at his word about not joining a Sharon government. Indeed, in order to avoid being outmaneuvered by centrist rivals or cabinet-hungry colleagues in the aftermath of a Labor defeat, Mitzna maximized his current leverage by demanding that a slew of former Labor cabinet ministers publicly declare that they would not join a Sharon government. Mitzna even made sure that these pledges were aired this week during Labor's primetime commercial spot. The size of Labor's defeat, Mitzna's internal standing in the aftermath, and the timing of a potential U.S. attack on Iraq may determine to what degree such statements are indeed definitive.

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