

In Israeli Right-Left Divide, Center May Hold the Balance of Power

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Brief Analysis

The slide in the polls of Ariel Sharon's Likud Party over the last six weeks has been rather dramatic, transforming the character of the campaign from an expected Sharon landslide into a closer contest. In Thursday's Yediot Ahronot-Dahaf poll, Likud dropped from 40 to 28 seats in the 120-member Knesset, while Amram Mitzna's Labor Party edged up to 24 seats from 22. Sharon's losses stem directly from the swirl of Likud election corruption allegations, beginning with low-level charges of vote buying—illegal activity that may have helped catapult Sharon's son Omri onto the parliamentary list. The latest charges, denied by Sharon, surround a \$1.5 million loan that the prime minister borrowed from a South African businessman friend, Cyril Kern, to pay back illegal campaign contributions in 1999. Sharon still clings to the hope that his denials will halt his party's slide downward, while Mitzna is finding new hope in the prospect that a drop in support for Likud will lead voters to take a second look at his candidacy.

Focus on Blocs

Though much can happen before voting takes place on January 28, this campaign should not be viewed as a Likud-Labor horse race. Israeli electoral law has reverted to the pre-1996 status quo, with no direct election for prime minister. Instead, there is one vote for a party list, and seats are allocated among the parties based on their respective percentage of the vote. (During the past six years, voters had separate ballots for premier and parliamentary parties.) Therefore, the real contest is not between two men, Sharon and Mitzna, or even between their parties, but among three main blocs: right, left, and center.

At the end of November, the right-wing bloc (including religious and Russian immigrant parties) polled 68 seats, safely above the 61-vote majority required for the 120-member Knesset. According to yesterday's Dahaf poll, the right-wing bloc is at 63, a drop of 5 seats. In other words, if elections were held today and the polls were accurate, Sharon would still be guaranteed a right-wing majority, reducing the significance of Likud's losses. Still, Sharon has indicated that he would rather not rule with a narrow government of 63, publicly making it clear that he would invite Labor to join a national-unity coalition—believing that a broad-based government insulates him from both domestic and American pressure. With a 63-seat bloc, he would be in the driver's seat when it comes to forming another unity coalition with Labor. But if that bloc drops 3 more seats to 60 as a result of three more weeks of scandal, a new

dynamic is likely to emerge. Indeed, if the right-wing parties do not have a built-in majority—even if Likud remains ahead of Labor—post-election bargaining will be different. Suddenly, Labor and the sleeper party of this election season, the centrist Shinui (currently polled at 17 seats), could set terms for a Sharon-led government by insisting on slashing welfare payments for the ultra-orthodox and the settlers, and blocking the expulsion of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat from the West Bank and Gaza. Moreover, one cannot rule out the possibility that immediate post-election bargaining may occur just as the United States attacks Baghdad. Thus, Israel would be between Iraq and a polling place.

Israeli Arabs Get Boost

In the race between the right and left blocs, according to yesterday's poll, the right maintains 63 seats and the left has 36.5, representing a considerable gap. The left received a boost yesterday, but not nearly enough to bridge that gap. After the recent Israeli Election Commission decision disqualifying two Arab parties (headed respectively by Azmi Bishara and Ahmed Tibi) on the assertion that the parties approve of violence against Israel, the Supreme Court yesterday reversed the commission's move. This is likely to energize voter turnout among the Israeli Arab sector—comprising approximately 20 percent of the country. In 1999, 75 percent of Israeli Arabs voted, but that number vertiginously dropped to a nadir of 18 percent in the 2001 election for premiership, which took place in the wake of Israeli Arab riots at the start of the Palestinian violence. According to yesterday's poll, the Israeli Arab parties make up 8 seats of the left bloc, and this number is likely to expand. On the other hand—except during the brief period between the 1993 signing of the initial Oslo agreement and 1996—Israeli Arab parties have never been integral to any coalition; during this period, they did not formally participate in the government, nor even in coalition meetings. The swing party for a left-center coalition is Shinui leader Yosef (Tommy) Lapid. He has said recently that he would resist a coalition predicated on the Arab vote, believing that life-and-death decisions about Israel's future should be made by Jewish parties. As it stands now, Lapid's position greatly reduces prospects for the formation of such a coalition.

Shinui and the Secular Coalition

The center bloc of 20.5 seats, comprised mainly of Shinui, may hold the balance of power in Israel after January 28. Lapid's Shinui success has been the biggest surprise of the campaign. A television commentator, Lapid inherited a staid, free-market party that traditionally attracted 2 seats; by 1999, he had moved the party to 6 seats. According to yesterday's poll, Shinui is likely to skyrocket this year to 17 seats. Its meteoric success is rooted in a few specific issues. Originally, Lapid appealed to voters' resentment of ultra-orthodox Jews who do not serve in the army or pay taxes, but still receive special welfare payments from the state. During this election season, Lapid's appeal has grown as a result of Israel's sharp economic downturn that has created the sense among voters that the public purse is depleted. With a middle class believing that it bears the brunt of high taxes in a struggling post-socialist economy, the timing for Lapid's message is propitious.

Shinui attracts voters from two other sources. First, Lapid's steadfast refusal during the Barak and Sharon governments to join a coalition with the religious Shas Party has created a patina of purism that stands in sharp contrast to the current corruption scandals. Second, the collapse of the peace process has led to a halving of Labor support (compared to the 1999 contest), with many of the party's former voters looking for a new political home—at least until prospects for peace are brighter. These voters tend to be secular and Ashkenazic (of European extraction). Although they cannot bring themselves to vote Labor, they believe that Likud has become too tied up with its constituents in the religious blocs and the settlements.

Ironically, Likud may also be hurt by suspicions among its Sephardic (of Middle Eastern extraction) voters—often more religiously traditionalist—that the party will abandon them for a coalition with Shinui. The more the Israeli media talks about a Likud-Labor-Shinui secularist coalition stemming from Likud's probable losses in the ballot box,

the more these voters will fear that a vote for Sharon might be a vote for their nemesis, Lapid. Until now, Sharon has done nothing to prevent such speculation, believing that the mere mention of a secular coalition enhances his attractiveness among voters susceptible to Lapid's appeal. Consequently, support for the religious parties is growing at Likud's expense as votes in the right bloc are redistributed. As January 28 looms large, the growth in support for religious parties may just provide a boost for Lapid's campaign against them.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

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