

The Intra-Likud Power Struggle and Israeli National Elections

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Brief Analysis

The Likud Central Committee meets on Sunday to discuss a resolution opposing Palestinian statehood. Such a resolution could be seen as an important declarative step, despite its lack of legal significance (Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has publicly endorsed the idea of Palestinian statehood—albeit in vague terms). Although a vote on the topic may not occur, the fact that such a resolution is even being tabled casts a spotlight both on the party that is consistently leading Israeli polls and on the efforts of former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu to unseat his rival, Sharon.

The next national elections are currently scheduled for November 2003, but, as is often the case in Israeli politics, they could very well be held sooner. Interestingly, the current frontrunner is neither Sharon nor a member of Labor, the main opposing party, but rather a member of the prime minister's own party, the Likud. Two significant developments in the political landscape have contributed to this trend: first, in March 2001 the Knesset repealed the system of direct prime-ministerial elections and reinstated most of the elements of the old system, hoping to aid the larger parties (Likud and Labor) at the expense of smaller ones; second, since the outbreak of the current wave of Palestinian violence in September 2000, the voting preferences of the Israeli electorate have shifted dramatically to the right.

The New Election Laws

The indirect election system to which Israel has reverted includes a single, nationwide vote for parties (not for individual candidates). The 120 seats in the Knesset are then allocated proportionately according to the results of that vote, and negotiations for the formation of a coalition are begun. Those who supported the return to this indirect system hoped to counterminimize the supposedly devastating effect that direct prime-ministerial elections have had on the two main parties. For instance, the Likud holds only nineteen seats in the current Knesset, its lowest tally since it first ran as the Gahal bloc in 1965. Detractors argue that the old system grants swing-voting power to the smaller factions in the Knesset, which currently consists of nineteen factions in all.

The Shift to the Right

A strengthening of the right wing in Israeli politics first became apparent in the special prime-ministerial elections held in February 2001, when Sharon beat Prime Minister Ehud Barak by an almost two-to-one landslide. A poll conducted by the Dahaf Research Institute in late March 2002 suggests that if elections were held today, the Likud would receive some thirty-one seats, while Labor would drop to its lowest tally ever with eighteen. More important, the poll predicts that the right-wing bloc could gain a very comfortable Knesset base of some sixty-seven seats, due mainly to realignments of centrist and religious parties.

Underlying this shift to the right is, of course, the ongoing violent conflict with the Palestinians, against the backdrop of the failed Camp David summit in the summer of 2000. One of the most important factors in this shift was highlighted in a Gallup poll published in Ma'ariv on March 30, 2001, in which 67 percent of Israelis said they did not

believe that there was a partner for peace on the Palestinian side. The result of this attitude has been a rejection of dovish approaches to foreign policy and a preference for hawkish ones.

These two changes taken together—indirect elections and the electorate's shift to the right—mean that the internal right-wing power struggle will probably determine the identity of Israel's leadership over the next few years. Candidates no longer have to court the center in order to win close elections; instead, they must now win over the majority of the right-wing camp itself. The relative power of candidates among right-wing voters is especially important since, according to the newly restored indirect election procedure, the leader of the Likud will be elected in a primary among all Likud members. These factors may help to explain the current radicalization of Israeli politics evident in the upcoming Likud Central Committee vote, as well as in recent public polls that reveal the growing legitimacy of the idea of "transferring" Palestinians from the Occupied Territories.

Netanyahu has, until recently, maintained a commanding lead among right-wing voters in polling data while receiving scores very close to Sharon among the general Israeli public (it is perhaps worth noting that although Netanyahu now situates himself to the right of Sharon, the positions were reversed when Netanyahu was prime minister and Sharon was foreign minister). At the time of the March 2001 Gallup poll, 40 percent of the general public preferred Sharon as prime minister, while 37 percent preferred Netanyahu. And among those respondents who voted for Sharon in the last elections, Netanyahu led Sharon 49 percent to 38 percent. Since the Israeli operation in the West Bank in April 2002, however, the two men seem to be tied evenly among right-wing voters, as a Market Watch poll from April 26, 2002, suggests; it remains to be seen whether this phenomenon will persist.

Does the Left Wing Still Have a Chance?

Various public polls have indicated that many Israelis view a Likud victory as a given, particularly in the wake of recent leadership crises in Labor. It is difficult to make such a sweeping prediction so far in advance, however. Any prediction must take into account an anomaly in Israeli public opinion: although short-term voting forecasts seem to indicate a strong shift to the right, there is nonetheless a deep underlying current in the opposite direction regarding Israel's long-term goals. The old ideological debate in the 1980s and early 1990s between the visions of "land for peace" and a unified "Land of Israel" seems to have been decided in favor of the former. In a Yediot Aharonot poll on April 4, 2002, 73 percent of Israelis replied in the affirmative when asked whether Israel should enter into negotiations for the establishment of a Palestinian state once terrorism is halted. This casts doubt on whether the Likud Central Committee's upcoming discussion of Palestinian statehood will be relevant to the general Israeli public.

Moreover, the central issue of the election has yet to coalesce. Historically, domestic tickets have favored the left, as was the case in 1992 and, to some degree, in 1999. Today, however, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict overshadowing all other issues, foreign and security policy will probably dominate the preelection scene. Yet, the Labor party could adopt an alternative policy, such as the unilateral-separation strategy advocated by Ehud Barak and Haim Ramon, to name a few. In a February 15, 2002, Market Watch poll, more than 65 percent of Israelis supported unilateral separation, including a large majority of right-wing voters. It is important to note, however, that the wide variety of ideas placed under the "unilateral separation" banner enables many leaders to endorse some form of separation, including those on the right.

Conclusion

At the moment, the Likud seems likely to lead the next government. Since both Ariel Sharon and Binyamin Netanyahu have made clear their intention to run for prime minister, the race, in essence, has already begun. Unless significant changes occur in the left wing and in the diplomatic arena, the increasingly hawkish rhetoric of the Likud leadership is not likely to change before a leader for the party is chosen. As is often the case in Israel, internal

political dynamics will continue to be a factor in shaping the country's foreign policy.

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