

# Israeli Elections and the Peace Process

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### Brief Analysis

Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak's decision yesterday to preempt his opponents and announce his willingness to hold early elections must be seen in the context of his interest in reviving the peace process. The vote for early balloting was driven by both animus toward the failed Camp David summit and by the Barak governments handling of the subsequent Al-Aqsa Intifada.

While Barak does not relish the thought of early elections, he decided that it was preferable to constraints that would be imposed upon him in any "unity government" arrangement with his Likud opponents. Likud leader Ariel Sharon was insistent on demanding a veto over all initiatives connected to the peace process. While supportive of the unity idea, Barak was ultimately unwilling to pay Sharon's price. This position led to a cascade of actions in the Knesset yesterday as it grappled with a bill calling for early elections. Member of Knesset (MK) Yosef (Tommy) Lapid, who heads the small Shinui party and was seeking to use his tie-breaking role in order to broker such a grand coalition, announced that he saw the Labor Party as the primary obstacle to a unity government and would vote against Barak. Once the die was cast and it was clear that the vote for early elections would pass, Arab parliamentarians also swung behind the move. For them, it was to be a protest against the Barak government, despite urgings from Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's office calling on Arabs not to vote against Barak. The Israeli Arabs have been particularly upset by the Israeli police's handling of clashes with Israeli Arabs at the start of the violence and by Israel's overall handling of the current intifada. Moreover, the seventeen-member Shas religious faction has faced grassroots opposition, based on criticism of Barak's concessions at Camp David and his failure to militarily quash the current intifada. Faced with this set of circumstances, Barak decided to preempt the vote and decide on early elections. With Barak's support, the vote ultimately passed 75 to 1 (with 29 abstentions), amid speculation that the balloting will occur in May.

**Impact on the Peace Process** After his announcement, Barak gave interviews where he reiterated that he will not be deterred in the search for peace. Barak hopes that a peace deal with the Palestinians will not only enhance Israeli security, but will also catapult him to victory. He is currently at an all-time low in approval ratings, as he has only 27 percent of public support. While he has earned poor marks from the public for his handling of the violence and while public trust in Arafat is exceedingly low, Barak seems to be counting on the public to swing behind a new peace deal. According to a Gallup Poll taken on Friday, the Israeli public would support a deal, presumably reached along the

lines of Camp David, by a 53 to 35 percent margin. Moreover, now that the elections are a certainty, Barak will likely feel liberated from domestic political constraints of the last year and a half as he pursues a deal with the Palestinians. This does not necessarily mean it will be a full deal. In the last few days, Barak has mentioned the possibility of a partial deal, perhaps focusing on territory and delaying highly-charged issues such as Jerusalem and refugees. Should he succeed, he will be able to campaign as a peacemaker, while charging that the Likud in the very fragile current context would lead the country to a regional war. Barak will also claim that the election will serve as a national referendum for any deal that he has negotiated with the Palestinians.

Navigating Between the Palestinians and the Likud Yet Barak's pursuit of a peace deal is a walk along the political tightrope. If he makes concessions that substantially exceed those he offered at Camp David, he will be vulnerable to sharp political attacks by the Likud and others that the peace deal is being driven by politics and not by the good of the country. Some will also question the wisdom of yielding territorial assets, without nailing down a comprehensive final deal that would herald the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Already, there are indications that the Likud will seek to delegitimize any diplomatic initiative undertaken by Barak during the period leading up to the election. The likely Likud line of attack will be that Barak has essentially been booted from office since he does not have a governing majority. Therefore, they will say, he has no right to engage in substantive negotiations between now and the next election. Within hours of the Barak announcement, Likud MK Danny Naveh tabled a bill forbidding a government without a governing majority from initialing any peace agreement.

Early indications are that the Palestinians will welcome this renewed focus on peacemaking, believing they can maximize their leverage as a result of Barak's sagging electoral fortunes. Palestinian Authority cabinet minister Nabil Shaath said today, "Barak still has six months until the upcoming elections, and if he wants, he can stop his aggression and adopt a new policy that will enable him to go to his people with progress in the peace process." Palestinians may also anticipate that Barak is preparing fresh concessions on refugees. Barak is cited in Haaretz today as saying Israel "expelled" Palestinians in 1948, along with those who left during wartime, making this the first known time an Israeli prime minister has said this.

Even if the Palestinians seek to renew efforts for a deal, it remains unclear whether they prefer to embark on such talks with President Clinton or to wait for his successor to take office. There have been Arab press statements suggesting George W. Bush should he become the next president would be more sympathetic toward the Palestinian position, given that his father was known to be hostile to settlements and close with Arab Gulf states. Given all the permutations in the United States at the moment, it seems likely Barak will want elections as late as possible so that he has time to improve his public standing and see if a deal with the Palestinians is still within reach.

Internal Leadership Challenges There is another reason why the parties may exceed the ninety-day minimum election period required by law. It seems almost certain that there will be an internal leadership challenge within the Likud, and one cannot completely rule out such a challenge within Labor, either. Therefore, there needs to be time for internal contests to play themselves out before there is a general election. Having lost to Barak in 1999, former Likud prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu is buoyed by current polling data that indicates he would defeat Barak by at least a 48 to 27 margin. Hence, it is extremely likely that he will seek to run again. Current Likud leader Ariel Sharon has already said that he will run as well. The Labor situation is trickier. Speaker of the Knesset Avrum Burg has suggested that he may challenge Barak, and is hoping to garner support among party doves. Yet, some believe that the Burg decision to run will hinge on whether or not there is a diplomatic breakthrough with the Palestinians.

Israel's Balkanized Electorate It should be stated that this is shortest-lasting elected government in Israel's history, as the vote for new elections was passed only a year and a half after Barak won a landslide in May 1999. The call for early elections can be partially traced to the gravity of events that have occurred during this period (Camp David and

the current intifada), and can also be traced to other problems that have plagued Barak, including tensions between coalition partners and tensions surrounding religious-secular issues.

However, there are also structural problems within the Israeli electoral system that cannot be ignored. Israel's unique system has helped to produce a fragmented electorate. The upcoming election will mark the third time in five years that Israel will head to the polls. The fact that Israelis cast two ballots one for prime minister and one for the Knesset has meant that the two largest parties (Labor and Likud) have lost their hegemony within the Israeli system. In 1981, these parties won 95 of 120 seats. Today, they hold only 45 of 120 seats. While the late Yitzhak Rabin led a rather homogenous government made up of a few parties to the historic Oslo agreement, Barak has had to cobble together a very heterogeneous mix of no fewer than seven political parties. This underscores the need for a mechanism that will ultimately enhance Israel's political stability, as there are signs that Israel is becoming increasingly ungovernable.

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