

Israeli Elections and the Peace Process

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Brief Analysis

Election Background. Over the last thirty years, Israeli elections have primarily focused on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although this issue remains important not only vis-a-vis the Palestinians but also Lebanon, this election has so far focused more on Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's leadership. The Wye accords de-ideologized Israeli politics. The Likud agreed in principle to cede land to the Palestinians, and Netanyahu became the third Israeli prime minister (and first Likud prime minister) to meet with Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat. With the exception of far-right ideologues, the debate has been narrowed to security agreements rather than whether or not to redeploy from West Bank. The terms "left" and "right" refer to cultural and educational position now rather than ideological positions on the territories.

One result of this narrowing of ideological differences has been an electoral campaign that has highlighted the importance of television as a medium to display the candidates' personalities and to provide a forum for mudslinging. The candidates have issued few statements on policy matters. Last week, Labor party chairman Ehud Barak was the first of the prime ministerial candidates to articulate a policy direction in his statement on Lebanon. The Center party, led by Yitzhak Mordechai, has yet to articulate a platform or coherent policy.

The graying of political lines also means that there are any number of possible coalition permutations after the election because, with certain exceptions, like the leader of the Herut party Benny Begin, the candidates have not outlined in detail for what they stand.

Netanyahu's Support Base. At first glance, Netanyahu appears to be unpopular. He is reviled abroad; in fact, part of the reason that the "May 4" issue has fizzled out is that foreign leaders feared that a Palestinian unilateral declaration of independence would aid Netanyahu's re-election bid. He has been abandoned by many of the top leaders of his own political bloc: Mordechai, Begin, David Levy, and Dan Meridor. He arouses suspicion from both ends of the political spectrum. It would appear as if Netanyahu has surely alienated more than the margin of 30,000 voters that won him the 1996 election.

Yet, demographic data show that he is the front-runner. According to reliable polling sources, there are five main voting blocks in Israel:

- Sephardim (Jews of Spanish ancestry), who are 20% of the electorate;

- religious (orthodox and ultra-orthodox are grouped together for this purpose) Jews, 17%;
- Russian immigrants from the last decade, 16%;
- Ashkenazim (Jews of Western European ancestry), 28%; and
- Israeli Arabs, 19%.

Netanyahu has a strong base of support among the first three groups, who make up 53% of the electorate. Moreover, the groups that support Netanyahu are growing in their share of the Israeli population, thanks to the high birth rate among the religious and the continued immigration from the former Soviet Union, which has already added 100,000 new voters since the 1996 election.

The Sephardim and the religious identify with Netanyahu more through the politics of identity than through peace process issues. Netanyahu has been successful in creating an "outsider" alliance that is perpetually angry with the "cultural elite" that dominates the country. Netanyahu appeals to this outsider group that believes the "left" is trying to "de-Judaize" Israel and make it into Scandinavia. For this reason, most news stories against Netanyahu actually aid his credibility in their eyes. Furthermore, the Sephardic Shas party and haredim (ultra-orthodox) have done very well as a result of Netanyahu's coalition. Many of the haredim receive government stipends for study in seminaries.

The Russian grassroots voters have not abandoned Netanyahu. They like his hard line on Arabs, and they dislike Labor's traditional association with socialism. But perhaps most importantly, Netanyahu is close with Industry and Trade Minister Natan Sharansky, who provides voters of Russian origin with a visible active Russian leader -- something that Labor has yet to do.

The Opposition's Dilemma. The opposition to Netanyahu is faced with a dilemma in that polls show that Mordechai beats Netanyahu handily in a potential second round but cannot beat Barak in the first round. On the other hand, Barak can easily beat Mordechai in the first round, but it is unclear whether he can defeat Netanyahu in a potential second round. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see Barak and Mordechai making an alliance in the first round, with one stepping aside. If Mordechai throws his lot in with Barak before the first round, the Center party will lose potential seats in the Knesset elections and will be less of a force in any coalition. On the other hand, with final status still ahead, if Barak throws his lot in with Mordechai before the first round, Labor would be in an unprecedented situation for a party of its size and history; it is unthinkable for the party that dominated Israeli politics for decades not to field a candidate for prime minister.

In a second round, despite the polls, it will be difficult for either Mordechai or Barak to defeat Netanyahu. Israeli Arabs, who make up nineteen percent of the electorate, will turn out in huge numbers for the first round to vote for their favorite candidates for the Knesset. There could be a significant drop off for a second round vote; few Arabs are excited about voting for a Zionist ex-general, even against Netanyahu. On the other hand, with final status still ahead, the religious groups and settlers are very motivated and will come out to vote for Netanyahu in the second round.

Furthermore, in the first round campaign, Barak and Mordechai will weaken each other's candidacy. Recently, Mordechai accused Barak of not understanding the soul of Sephardic Jews. These kind of statements cause division and will help Netanyahu in a second round that will take place only two weeks later -- not a lot of time to heal public wounds. Finally, Israel is a country of six million prime ministers. In the second round of voting, every Israeli will already know the make up of the new Knesset and therefore will strategize as to how to create a counter-balance and offset the electoral results from the first round.

Leadership. No matter who wins the elections, there should be a unity government. The upcoming negotiations over final status will be the most important negotiations in Israel's history, and the agreement should be signed by both the right and left. A future Israeli government needs the right involved to deal with the anger of settlers when some settlements are consolidated, as may well happen. It also needs the left to dispel the Arab notion that a better deal might be forthcoming. With Washington's strong desire to restart peace talks with Syria, and the growing sentiment to withdraw from Lebanon, there is also potential for a two-front peace negotiation, which will be difficult to digest. Moreover, a unity government would prevent small parties from blackmailing the government and could create a new sense of internal priorities and proportions based on the real balance of power. To be sure, even in a unity government, the decision about who is prime minister remains important, because the prime minister sets the tone and attitude for the government.

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