

Prospects for an Election in Israel:

An Early Look

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Brief Analysis

Barring some last minute parliamentary leger demain by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, today almost surely marks the beginning of an election campaign in Israel, with the actual vote probably to be held in April 1999. Although prognostications are premature, the campaign is likely to witness an explosion of candidates for prime minister and a further atomization of the Knesset.

Background: In Israel's first-ever direct election of a prime minister, Netanyahu was elected in May 1996 by a razor-thin majority over Labor's Shimon Peres. Yet, Netanyahu's Likud Party fared considerably worse than its leader, winning only 22 seats on its own, just about one-sixth of the Knesset. (The balance of Likud's 32-seat parliamentary bloc really belonged to David Levy's Geshet and Raphael Eitan's Tsomet.) Netanyahu was able to stitch together a coalition government that incorporated nine different parties, the widest in Israel's history, a coalition whose very breadth held the seeds of its own demise. On the key issue of territorial compromise -- should Israel withdraw from considerable chunks of the West Bank to continue the implementation of the Labor-designed Oslo process? -- the coalition was sorely divided. It was able to absorb the "redeployment" from part of the city of Hebron in January 1997 -- which was essentially tying up a loose end from the governments of Peres and his predecessor, the late Yitzhak Rabin -- but the Wye River commitment to expand Palestinian control to two-fifths of the West Bank proved politically unsustainable.

It was, ironically, when Netanyahu broke with the ideological right and moved toward the center via the Wye accord that his coalition finally came apart. Netanyahu was surprised that his post-Wye "bump" in the polls was so weak and short lived and even more so by the vehement denunciation by his loyalists among the settler and ultra-orthodox constituencies. The Labor Party has provided a "safety net," of sorts, while Wye is implemented, but the rejection of Netanyahu's backhanded offer to form a National Unity coalition, along with the likely vote to disperse the Knesset, sounds the death-knell for the safety net.

Of course, fracturing within the governing coalition has been under way for some time, most noticeably within the Likud core. For example, former Finance Minister Dan Meridor, a relative moderate on peace issues, and former Science Minister Benny Begin, a confirmed hawk, disagree on matters of policy but represent somewhat of a

consensus among Likud veterans that Netanyahu has led the party astray. Last week's resignation by Finance Minister Ya'akov Ne'eman, a technocrat close to Netanyahu, was a further blow; although Ne'eman is not officially a Likud man, his departure was hastened by a political ploy by Netanyahu that backfired against the prime minister and exacerbated his problems inside the party (that is, he tried offering the finance minister's job, as well as hundreds of Likud Central Committee slots, to entice David Levy back to the government).

Parliamentary Maneuvers: As with most aspects of Israeli politics, there are numerous complexities surrounding the decision to hold new elections. Today, members of the Knesset (MKs) will vote on the first reading of a bill to disperse parliament and hold new elections. Two weeks ago, to delay the vote, it had been made a "confidence" motion by coalition partner United Torah Judaism party, acting on Netanyahu's request. If the government loses in this form, elections must occur within sixty days. Although some of his most vociferous critics in the settler movement have begun to lobby MKs on Netanyahu's behalf, as the least of all evils, chances of avoiding defeat have dimmed. Should it be clear that sixty-one MKs will line up against the government, Netanyahu is likely to withdraw the confidence motion and turn to several other options:

- He may ask President Ezer Weizman to disperse the Knesset and order new, early elections both prime minister and Knesset. This would give him the appearance of acting, rather than reacting, and would provide more leeway to negotiate a satisfactory election date (mooted to be April 27, just before the Oslo deadline of May 4.) This option is most likely.
- He may resign the prime ministry, leaving parliament in place as is. In this case, special elections would be held only for prime minister, with the Knesset remaining intact. The benefit would be to take advantage of the legal requirement that all candidates for prime minister in a special election must be members of parliament, thereby precluding the candidacies of former Tel Aviv mayor Roni Milo and just retired IDF chief of staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak. One obvious disadvantage with this option is that even if he were victorious, Netanyahu would be left with the same constellation of Knesset forces with which he is currently struggling. This option is less likely.
- He may make another, more concerted, effort to form a National Unity government. Whereas this may have been an option in earlier days, as indicated by serious discussions between Netanyahu and Barak, as well as between Ariel Sharon and Shimon Peres, Labor today smells political blood. As a result, it is far more likely to prefer taking its chances at the polls than to embark on a "porcupine's embrace" with Netanyahu.

Likely Candidates: At this early date, the prime ministerial race looks to have at least three -- and perhaps many more -- candidates. These include Netanyahu; Labor's Barak; and Shahak, who technically still serves in the IDF for another few weeks. (Election law stipulates that he can only participate in politics after having been out of uniform for 100 days, but he could resign early from the IDF to launch a court battle to safeguard his candidacy, which would create more political wrinkles.) Other possible candidates include Milo, who months ago announced his intention to run on a secularist platform; ambitious Arab MK Azmi Bishara, who has argued that only an independent Arab candidacy can insure that the Arab vote is not taken for granted by Labor; and a protest candidate representing the remnants of Likud's revisionist "true-believers," such as Begin or Uzi Landau. Less likely to run are David Levy, whose party failed miserably in last month's local elections; former chief of staff Raphael Eitan, who threatened to run in 1996 and was coopted by Netanyahu with an offer of safe seats within the Likud list; Dan Meridor, who is expected to join forces with Shahak in a new centrist party; and Meretz's Yossi Sarid, who was once expected to lead a leftist/Zionist alternative to Barak.

According to Israel's election law, elections for prime minister require the victor to receive 50-percent-plus-one of votes cast. For Netanyahu, the objective is to win a knockout in the opening round and to avoid a run-off. That is

because balloting for Knesset parties will have already taken place in the first round, meaning that there is likely to be some drop-off from key voting blocs (e.g. ultra-orthodox) who will come out in droves for their party but perhaps not for Netanyahu alone. For Barak and Shahak, the objective is to beat the other in the first-round of balloting and go head-to-head against Netanyahu in the second round, with a unified front of center, left and Arab parties. Therefore, Netanyahu will be fighting to get 50 percent in round one while Barak and Shahak will each be delighted to get 35 percent.

In recent opinion polls, Shahak appears to be the candidate Netanyahu fears most; in one poll, he trounced the incumbent 52 percent to 35 percent. That level of popularity, however, is bound to be short-lived. Shahak has barely spoken in public and has not even announced his candidacy; his poll numbers will be sure to fall once he adopts positions on public policy that will anger one constituency or another. Conversely, despite the perception that he never "took off" as opposition leader, Barak should not be discounted too quickly, as the Labor Party machinery does provide a vast institutional advantage that will be impossible for any political neophyte, like Shahak, to compete against in such a short period of time. Once he does begin to campaign, the attractive and articulate Shahak can be expected -- contrary to conventional wisdom -- to run slightly to the right of Barak on peace issues; indeed, both former chiefs of staff are likely to campaign on platforms de-emphasizing ideological differences between themselves and Netanyahu and instead underscoring themes of trust, confidence, competence and responsibility. In contrast, Netanyahu has already called Shahak "a man of the left" and can be expected to depict both Shahak and Barak as patrons of the "flawed" Oslo accords. A Hobbesian campaign -- nasty, brutish, and short -- is assured.

Not to be overlooked is the likely concurrent campaign for the Knesset. As underscored by the collapse of Netanyahu's coalition, even a directly elected prime minister needs the support of a Knesset majority to form and sustain a government. The 1996 election pointed the way toward the political reality of two-ballot voting -- one for prime minister, one for party -- in which the two major parties, Likud and Labor, both suffered. That pattern is almost sure to be affirmed in 1999. Last month's local elections underscored the abiding strength of ethnic politics in Israel, with Natan Sharansky's Russian immigrant party showing surprising nationwide appeal and the Sephardi Shas party maintaining its widespread popularity; similarly, the dominance of the ultra-orthodox in Jerusalem, trouncing the slate of victorious Likud Mayor Ehud Olmert, testified to their growing electoral power. Whereas some small moderate parties, like the Third Way and Geshet, may suffer setbacks, the formation of a powerful new centrist party around Shahak and Meridor is likely to have wide attraction. The bottom line is that the Knesset that emerges in 1999 may have more parties represented than any in Israel's history, with Labor and Likud together not likely to muster a majority, and with prospects for a coherent, broad-based, post-election peace policy not necessarily brighter than they are today.

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