

Teim



TEIM Election Watch Analysis

ELECTORAL REPORT:

ISRAEL/Parliamentary elections

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Background of the elections:

The Israeli parliamentary elections on 10 February 2009 were held almost two years before their scheduled date, as has become customary in Israel over the last twenty years. The reason this time was atypical – corruption – although many analysts agree that this legislature was doomed to end abruptly after the fiasco of the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006.

The 17th Knesset had begun its legislative term with high expectations and optimism. For the first time in the history of the State of Israel, a new party, *Kadima* ('forward' in Hebrew) won the elections. This party, founded by the now convalescent Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, was designed to break out of the endless political stalemate that was tearing Israeli politics apart in a left-right tug-of-war and preventing the Jewish state from advancing in the process of establishing definitive borders, an anomaly weighing heavily on its existence. Sharon's idea was to create a new party based on his image as a strong leader, a kind of 'father of the nation' in the style of David Ben-Gurion, which would occupy the centre in Israeli politics, a big, strong party that would be able to govern easily with little outside support.

In fact, the polls predicted that Sharon would have won nearly 45 seats in the Knesset, something that had not taken place since 1992. But in the end, it was not to be. Sharon succumbed to a massive cerebral haemorrhage and could not run as a candidate. Running in his place was his number two, a grey politician named Ehud Olmert, who was not able to attract as many votes as his predecessor would have, and under his leadership, Kadima won only 29 seats. The historic party of the right, Likud, plummeted to a historical low of 12 seats.

Even then, Kadima's victory showed that the party was not an illusion, and that there really was an unexploited 'centre' among Israeli voters. Along with the Labour party, led by union leader Amir Peretz (a historical event in itself, since Peretz is a Jew with Sephardic roots and resident of Sderot, on the southern periphery of Israel), and other parties, a centre-left government was easily formed. The main challenges for Olmert were to maintain the fantastic level of economic growth inherited from the Sharon government and to continue to advance in the process of unilateral 'disengagement' from the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories, according to the plan designed by Sharon and carried out in the summer of 2005 in Gaza and the northern West Bank, which consisted of the evacuation of 20 settlements in Gaza and 4 from the northern West Bank (near Jenin).

Despite these optimistic intentions, hopes faded very quickly. In June 2006, only a few months after Kadima assumed leadership of the government, Corporal Gilad Shalit was kidnapped by Palestinian militants on the Gaza strip, which led to the beginning of the interminable deterioration in relations between Israel and the coastal strip. Only two weeks later, two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped by the Shiite militia group, Hezbollah, in Lebanon, which triggered a brutal 34-day war, the second Lebanese war.

The results of this war were catastrophic. Israel achieved almost none of its military objectives, while both Lebanon and northern Israel experienced destruction and great suffering among the civilian population. After the war, Olmert's government was pressured to create a commission to officially investigate the events that took place and Olmert's position was quite affected, with his popularity hitting new lows. The Minister of Defence, Amir Peretz, was forced to resign, thus putting an end to the fleeting dream of civilian leadership of

the Ministry of Defence. After this, Olmert lost his initiative and his programs of 'disengagement' were filed away.

Many analysts agreed that this initial weakening was the beginning of the end for Olmert. Months after the cessation of hostilities, several cases of supposed corruption began to emerge involving Olmert when he was mayor of Jerusalem and minister in Sharon's government. In the meantime, the commission's report on the war roundly censored the actions of the executive branch during the war.

Therefore, when a new wave of police and legal investigations began regarding supposed contacts between Olmert and a North American Jew, who allegedly passed him cash in envelopes, he could no longer maintain his political equilibrium. The new-old Labour leader, Ehud Barak, was forced to request Olmert's resignation, announcing that his party would have to leave the coalition if this did not occur. Even Olmert's number two, Foreign Secretary Tzipi Livni, called for the immediate removal of Olmert from his post. Olmert, an efficient and prudent politician, could not hold out any longer and in July 2008, he announced that he would not seek re-election for the presidency of his party in the primaries set for September, which turned him into a kind of lame duck, seriously weakening the power of the executive branch.

These primaries gave leadership of Kadima to Livni. Immediately afterwards, Olmert resigned from his post which, according to Israeli Basic Law, entailed the automatic dissolution of the entire government. President Simon Peres gave Livni responsibility for forming a new government. Livni failed in the attempt, because of the refusal of the ultraorthodox Sephardic party SHAS to be involved and her refusal to form a government with only parties from the left, which included 'non-Zionist' and Arabic parties. Thus, the path was free for the dissolution of the Knesset and the calling of early elections.

The brutal military offensive in Gaza which took place during the campaign had a significant political impact. It seems that Likud was substantially weakened, because its policies were being carried out by others. Kadima was strengthened, as was Labour. But in the end, the history of Israel has shown that military escalations strengthen the right and weaken the left, because of the radicalisation of the political discourse and the voters' lack of faith that a peace process with the Palestinians is really feasible.

Quantitative indices of democracy:

Israel was classified in the following democratic performance rankings just before these elections:

Measurement	Name and year of report or database	Institution	Index	Points, ranking and classification
Political rights and freedom	Freedom House Report 2008	Freedom House (FH)	PR: political rights CL: civil liberties	PR: 1, CL: 2 (Scale of 1, free to 7, not free) Classification: Free
Degree of democracy in earlier elections	Polyarchy 2.0 2004	Peace Research Institute of Oslo and Tatu Vanhanen	ID: Synthetic democracy index, Part: participation, Comp: competition	ID: 40.3, max. 49 Part: 57.6, max. 70 Comp: 70, max. 70 (Democracy minimum: ID: 5, Part: 10, Comp: 30) Classification: Democratic

Consolidation of authoritarian and democratic institutions	Polity IV 2004	Center for International Development and Conflict Management, Univ. of Maryland	Democracy: consolidation of democratic institutions Autocracy: authoritarian consolidation Polity: synthesis of both	Democracy: 10 Autocracy: 0 Polity: +10 (Scale of +10, very democratic to -10, very authoritarian) Classification: very democratic
Perception of corruption	Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2008	Transparency International (TI)	TICPI: corruption perceptions index	TCPI: 6 points out of 10 (Scale of 1, very corrupt to 10, not at all corrupt) Rank: 33 out of 180 countries
Management of political and economic change	Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2008	Bertelsmann Foundation	MI: Management Index, quality of transformation management	Israel is not classified.
Democracy, including press status and corruption	World Democracy Audit October 2008	World Audit	World Democracy Rank: political freedom (FH) + press and corruption (TI)	World Democracy Ranking: 31 out of 150 countries, division 2 out of 4

Evaluative analysis of electoral democracy:

The elections analysed in this profile produced the following electoral democracy quantitative results:

Degree of democracy in these elections	Measurement of democracy in these elections according to the 2009 Polyarchy 2.0 index, calculated by TEIM Election Watch	ID: 19.9, max. 49 Part: 46.9 ¹ max. 70 Comp: 42.5 ² max. 70 (Democracy minimum: ID: 5, Part: 10, Comp: 30)	Classification of the elections: democratic
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Definition of the electoral system and parties:

Israel has a proportional representation electoral system in the purest form. This means that the percentage of votes obtained by a list is translated almost directly into its respective parliamentary representation. The lists are closed and 2% of the vote is required to have any seats in parliament, making this the minimum threshold.

¹ Participation was calculated out of an estimated 2008 population of 7,282,000 inhabitants (Central Bureau of Statistics) and a total number of 3,416,587 votes cast.

² Percentage of seats obtained taking the block of parties principally from the right as the winning union, but also including Labour which, together with Likud, will form the government (Yisrael Beiteinu, The Jewish Home, SHAS and the Labour Party). The data were taken from the Commission's website: http://www.knesset.gov.il/elections18/heb/results/main_Results.aspx, consulted on 3/03/2009.

The State of Israel inherited this system from the pre-state period; this was how representatives to the central committee of the Zionist organisation were elected. The idea was to give voice to the plurality of ideas, movements and members of the Zionist collective. When he inherited this system after the creation of the state, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion wanted to change it, but could not do so because of the fierce opposition of the other parties, one part of which he needed to form the government. The system, therefore, has remained almost unchanged over the last 61 years.

Furthermore, Israel is not divided into electoral districts – the entire country is a single electoral constituency.

This system means that, in the last decade, there have been no clear winners in the elections. In these latest elections, this effect was even more intensified. The first party, Kadima, won only 22.5% of the votes, which translated into exactly this percentage of seats in parliament, 28 (out of a total of 120). Likud, which came in second with 21.6% of the votes, and therefore 27 seats, will lead the next government coalition, due to the fact that the block of right and conservative parties won a total of 65 seats (5 more than the absolute majority). Therefore, in order to govern, Likud will have to reach agreements with five other parties in order to form a right block in parliament.

All of this entails a multi-party system, with a very fragmented parliamentary spectrum. In the 18th Knesset, there will be 12 parliamentary groups, with no one dominant party. The result is a real puzzle for any politician trying to manage a functioning coalition, and after the polls closed, many political leaders called for a change in the electoral system, to guarantee a country that can be governed.

Election results:

- Registered voters: 5,278,985
- Participation: 65.2%
- Votes cast: 3,416,587
- Valid votes: 3,373,490
- Null votes: 43,097

Party	% valid votes	n° seats	% seats
Kadima	758,032 votes, or 22.5% of the votes	28	23.3%
Likud	729,054 votes, or 21.6%	27	22.5%
Yisrael Beiteinu	394,577 votes, or 11.7%	15	12.5%
SHAS	286,300, or 8.5%	11	9.1%
United Torah Judaism	147,954, or 4.4%	5	4.1%
The Jewish Home	96,575, or 2.9%	3	2.5%
Labour Party	334,900, or 9.9%	13	10.8%
Hadash (Communists)	112,130, or 3.3%	4	3.3%
National Union	112,570, or 3.3%	4	3.3%
United Arab List	113,954, or 3.4%	4	3.3%
Balad	83,739, or 2.5%	3	2.5%
Meretz	99,611, or 3%	3	2.5%

Evaluative analysis of the elections:

Participation:

This time, voter turnout improved a bit over the 2006 elections (65.2% versus 63%). Despite this small increase, participation in all the elections since the beginning of the new millennium has been lower than 70%, compared with earlier elections, which registered participation of more than 70%.

The explanations from analysts are many, from a general apathy toward politics because of its lack of impact on the peace process after each election, and the wave of corruption scandals which have plagued the political system over the last few years and contributed to a marked decrease in the confidence that the citizens have in their political class and parliament. Participation figures between the Palestinian-Israeli population were 55% for 2006 and 53% for 2009. One other important cause is the alienation felt by a large part of the Palestinian population with Israeli citizenship, because of the deterioration in Israeli-Palestine relations during the last few years. This last indicator is perhaps one of the reasons, in addition to the general decrease in participation, for the weakening of the left in Israeli politics.

Competition:

Twelve parties were able to win representation in parliament, exactly the same as in the 2006 elections. The total number of lists competing in the election was 33.

Generally speaking, the degree of competition in Israel is very high, with good expectations that new lists will be able to pass the minimum threshold needed to obtain parliamentary representation (only 2% of the vote is required). Moreover, the almost nonexistent requirements for presenting a list in the elections and the obvious incentives (each approved list receives state financing) means that there is a very wide range of parties in competition, and by extension, a large number of parliamentary groups.

Transparency:

There were no notable incidents on election day, except for a small altercation at one polling place in the Arab-Israeli city of Umm al-Fahm between local voters and representatives of the Jewish nationalist party National Union, or any reports of fraud after the polls closed. Moreover, all of the international watch groups awarded a high degree of transparency to the Israeli elections.

The body that supervises the elections is the Israeli Central Election Commission, which is independent and chaired by a Supreme Court Justice (in this case, the Court's Deputy President, Eliezer Rivlin).

Party representation and debate during the election:

Representation is the most notable factor in the Israeli political and electoral system and this objective is clearly met in the current political panorama, as reflected in these elections. The twelve parties in parliament represent all the different national groups that exist in Israel (Jews, Christian and Muslim Palestinians, the Druze), all social classes and all ideological facets (from Communists and Palestinian nationalists to Muslim conservatives and Orthodox Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews through liberals, conservatives, socialists and nationalists).

The campaign, which is usually quite lively, was somewhat duller this time, save for the last four days, when it seemed that Kadima might snatch leadership

from Likud. Overall, the media was open to the debate and all of the public and private television and radio channels broadcast election propaganda a couple of hours a day on behalf of all of the lists that were in the running (according to a division made by the Central Election Commission based on the parliamentary representation of the different lists with a minimum given to the lists without any representation).

Openness:

Although at the beginning of the campaign, the Central Election Commission prohibited the participation of two Arab parties (this commission is highly political in nature), that decision was struck down by the Supreme Court and in the end, all of the lists that wanted to were able to participate in the elections. The results revealed a high degree of openness insofar as it was not possible to predict the final results beforehand.

Significance:

These elections produced a substantial change in the play of the majorities in the Parliament, changing a clear advantage of the centre-left to a notable advantage for the nationalist, or right, block. This translated into a change in the government, which from this point on will be based on conservative forces, which could have serious repercussions for the peace process in the Middle East.

Consequences and impact on the political system:

Two obvious consequences resulted from these elections. The first is the clear advantage obtained by the parties of the right block, formed by both nationalist and populist and conservative (religious) forces, over the centre-left block. The right block has 65 seats in the Knesset and the centre-left only 55, which gives Benjamin Netanyahu an absolute majority with which to govern, despite the fact that his party did not receive the most votes.

A comparison with the last (17th) Knesset in which the centre-left block won 70 seats, reveals the great loss of support suffered by the Zionist left in these elections. In fact, if it were not for Kadima, which attracted votes that usually went to the left, and this time voted for Tzipi Livni as the only person capable of stopping Netanyahu (which could be called a 'tactical vote'), the Israeli Zionist left would be an almost insignificant force, with only 16 seats for Labour and the Meretz party (while, for example, in 1992, the two parties won 56 seats).

The second notable consequence is the high degree of political fragmentation in parliament. Not only are there twelve different parliamentary groups, but no one party emerged as the clear winner. Instead, there are two medium-sized parties (Kadima with 28 seats and Likud with 27) plus three smaller parties (Yisrael Beiteinu with 15, Labour with 13 and SHAS with 11). The rest is an amalgam of small parties, each with between 3 and 5 seats. This bleak political panorama, with no clear winner and with so many parties having parliamentary representation, implies significant obstacles for governing the country. It is clear that the Prime Minister will have to face a raft of different positions and demands, which will make the task of maintaining a stable and effective coalition difficult.

The great anomaly in these elections is that fact that although Livni heads the largest group in parliament, she is not going to lead the next government because she does not have the support of enough parties. Therefore, Netanyahu, who heads the second party, was responsible for forming a government, because

he has the support of six groups in parliament from the right for his nomination. But Netanyahu understood very well that the efficiency of his government would be seriously reduced if he did not manage to incorporate another centre-left party in his coalition. In fact, he only had 56 completely assured seats – one party, the National Union which is the party of the colonists, is very radical in its positions against any attempt to reach agreements with the Palestinians, while another, United Torah Judaism, is a very reactionary party regarding any change in the state-religion status quo, which complicates its coexistence with a laic party like Yisrael Beiteinu.

The great surprise in the process of forming the government came in the final home stretch, after President Peres gave Netanyahu two additional weeks to try to form a coalition. After several rounds of secret negotiations, Likud reached an agreement with Ehud Barak's Labour party. Although this agreement aroused a lot of anger among Labour followers, Barak and his allies managed to pass a resolution in favour of the Labour party joining Netanyahu's government. Therefore, Netanyahu can be happy: he is not going to have to rely exclusively on right parties, but has gained the symbolic support of the historical social-democratic party that signed the Oslo agreements. Along with Yisrael Beiteinu and SHAS, he now has 66 seats, enough to enjoy parliamentary support.

Reaction in the Middle East:

Clearly, the victory of the right in Israel does not augur easy times for relations between Israel and the region. Therefore, most of the Arab political leaders requested better coordination between the member states of the Arab League in order to respond to the challenges that may arise from Israel, and also to be able to create a common approach in their contacts with the new American administration for the purpose of pressuring President Obama to use his influence over the Israeli government to encourage the continuance of the peace process.

However, there was no desperation among the Arab countries. Most of the spokespeople had highly pragmatic views of the Israeli government in the making and maintained a line that focused on results, not on declarations, i.e., whether the Hebrew government will continue or not continue dialogue with its neighbours. For the Arabs, it does not matter much whether it is Netanyahu, Livni or Barak. It is deeds that are important, not personalities.

The only country that had a 'special' response was, surprisingly, Egypt. The declarations by the Egyptian Foreign Secretary and the Egyptian ambassador in Israel were much forceful in this respect than those of their Arab counterparts. The reason for this position is the intention of Prime Minister-elect Netanyahu to appoint Avigdor Lieberman as Foreign Secretary. Lieberman is known for using undiplomatic language in the past in reference to Egypt. Among other things, he said that, in case of emergency, Israel should bomb the Aswan dam and furthermore, he literally told the Egyptian president 'to go to hell' if he does not want to come to Israel on an official visit.

International political reaction:

As is usually the case with Israel, the elections triggered many reactions in international circles, most of which focussed on the foreseeable consequences for the peace process. Generally speaking, the reactions were quite negative, due to

the fact that the Israeli right is less committed to the peace process with the Arab world. Moreover, the right block also contains very problematic parties from a democratic point of view: the nationalist parties, like Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, which champions a hard line towards Israeli citizens of Palestine origin and National Union, which maintains an extremist line with respect to the occupied territories.

Most analysts agreed that it will be more difficult to advance towards a final resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians with a conservative government in Israel and predict difficulties in the relations between the new Israeli government and the new American administration.

Conclusions:

The Israeli elections of 10 February produced a quite problematic political scene. After the polls closed and the votes were counted, something that had never occurred before took place: two leaders from two opposing parties declared victory. Only after a long week of negotiations and manoeuvring did the decision by the leader of the third party (Yisrael Beiteinu) to support one of the candidates put an end to the spectacle. However, Netanyahu's victory was not sweet and in no way reflected his dreams of once again occupying the chair of Prime Minister.

In short, Netanyahu, who lost the 1999 election in an embarrassing way to the Labour leader Ehud Barak, is once again the candidate to occupy Ehud Olmert's post with his party, Likud, becoming the second party in parliament, while the majority party, Kadima, led by its new leader Tzipi Livni, becomes the opposition. Netanyahu wanted to form a government of national unity with Kadima, and thus once again become leader of an Israeli political centre, and not only the right. What he has achieved is the surprising addition of the Labour party to his government, which was very important when it came time to portray his government as more centrist and less extremist.

Livni, who won one more seat than Likud, is not willing to enter a government of national unity without obtaining a promise of rotating the seat of Prime Minister with Netanyahu, something that Netanyahu is not willing to concede. Therefore, Kadima will remain in the opposition.

This chaotic panorama has been created at a time when the political situation in the region is not remotely stable, neither with Hamas in Gaza or with Iran. Furthermore, the global economic crisis has begun to make itself felt in Israel, leading to growing unemployment figures. This situation requires a strong, stable executive branch in order to lead in the situation. A coalition that includes the Labour party, which was achieved at the last minute, will give much more stability to Netanyahu's executive power. It is ironic that the historical opponent of Likud, the Labour party, is now saving its face, while Kadima, which is supposedly more to the right of Labour, has become the main opposition party.