



Israel in 2009: A One-Block State of the Right

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The election result this week confirms the emergence of a one-block, right-of-center dominant political reality in Israel; a fact that is likely to dominate for many years to come. Kadima's electoral achievement is ephemeral; it masks the deeper and much more enduring socio-political ascendancy of the political right, both nationalist and religious. Both Livni and Netanyahu failed to sufficiently appreciate this reality, and as a result, made strategic campaign mistakes.

As party activists cheered the initial election results, Kadima leader Tzipi Livni must have realized in the privacy of her home the hollowness of her victory. Instead of a Kadima win, the Israeli electorate had in fact led the way towards the possibility of transforming Israel into a "one-block state" – a state of the political right wing. More than 60 percent of the electorate voted for parties on the nationalist, right and religious side of the political spectrum.

In the fifties and sixties, analysts spoke of Israel as a one-party dominant Mapai (Labor party) state. Emerging now is the potential for a one-block dominant variant: a soft right-wing block that spells an end to the Oslo era of grandiose peacemaking with the Palestinians.

(I say "soft right wing" because even parties of the Israeli right wing, with the exception of the tiny National Unity party, today espouse diplomatic positions that characterized the Labor Party before the Oslo peace process.)

In addition to the likely emergence of a one-block dominant polity, the February 2009 Israeli vote provides several other important lessons regarding

leadership, the Israeli electorate and society, and the future course of regional and international affairs, as detailed below.

Leadership: Livni and Netanyahu Strategic Mistakes

Both leading candidates made strategic mistakes. Netanyahu felt assured of a Likud victory and put the electorate to sleep by dropping out of sight. Thus, he turned down Livni's request for a television debate. This was one of the reasons he lost votes to the very active leader of Israel Beiteinu, Avigdor Lieberman.

When Netanyahu did start appearing in public and speaking out, very late in the race, he sought to move to the center by attacking and marginalizing the far right-wing within his party. Presumably the move to the center was the lesson he learned from his 1999 election failure against Barak. However, Netanyahu failed to fathom the extent to which the Israeli electorate had moved to the right, due to accumulated waves of Arab violence – the al-Aqsa Intifada, and the Lebanese and Gaza wars. Netanyahu thus deserves a failing grade for strategic acumen; a worrisome failure for Israel's likely prime minister.

Livni scores little better for much the same reason. She should have moved to the center, when in fact she moved to the left. She drew off votes from Labor without increasing the size of the center-left bloc she could lead. What's the use of winning a battle only to lose the war? It is noteworthy to mention that Livni, who failed to form a coalition government after the resignation of Ehud Olmert in September 2008, is beginning to appear as one who is forever near the pinnacle but never able to conquer it.

As a member of the former ruling triumvirate and of the once hegemonic Labor Party, Ehud Barak still deserves mention. Barak has outstanding virtues: he was an excellent soldier, IDF chief-of-staff, and Minister of Defense. But he's no politician or statesman. In many ways, Barak should have bolted to the Likud long ago and sought to make Likud more centrist.

The Electorate

Appearances do not always make up for substance. The media made great fanfare of Livni's campaign rounds in Tel Aviv bars and discotheques. But Livni should have realized that most Israelis live at a standard and style of living that is among the lowest of affluent Western states. Most never make the same discotheque rounds – even young Israelis. Livni's Kadima became a yuppie, Ashkenazi, secular party; which strategically is the wrong image.

Abraham Lincoln long ago said that God loves the common man, since he made so many of them. This is especially true of the Jewish Israeli electorate.

The Israeli common man is today mostly to be found in the Likud, Shas and Israel Beiteinu parties. At Likud headquarters, supporters mostly of Sephardic origin surrounded Benny Begin, hugging and chanting, "Bibi, Bibi, Begin, Begin." In short, the two blocs represent two markedly different cultures: a warm, traditional and brotherly culture, which includes the Russian variant – which is the dominant culture in Israel; versus a cold, achievement-oriented, secularized culture. Netanyahu is an oddity within his own block (but so was Menachem Begin).

Livni also made the strategic mistake of writing off the religious public, and by so doing, strengthened the center-right and religious alliance that has dominated Israel for most of the past 25 years. Of course, Livni should not take all of the blame. Ultra Orthodox parties certainly prefer a male prime minister to a female one, the biblical Prophetess Devorah notwithstanding.

A one-block-dominated electorate is, by definition, less polarized than Israel was during much of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. But these elections also reveal a less-polarized Israeli society in several additional ways.

Shas has long ago ceased to be an Ultra Orthodox party; it represents a much broader swath of Sephardim. Even United Torah Judaism is seeking to broaden its appeal. The Ultra Orthodox Ashkenazi party tried to win more votes by stressing the role of the Ultra Orthodox in fighting for social welfare benefits for all, irrespective of origin and religion. Israel Beiteinu, formerly an almost exclusive Russian immigrant party, also succeeded in winning a diverse vote. At least half of the national-religious (or "knitted kippa") sector also voted for parties beyond the national-religious Bayit Hayehudi and National Union. This raises the question as to whether the national-religious can still be classified as a unified camp.

Of course, the finding that there is less polarization in the electorate does not apply to the Arab minority. The Jewish-Arab divide, worsened by the recent Israel-Hamas war, will deepen in the coming years. The only saving grace is that the multi-cultural Israeli Jewish political elite uphold the liberal tenets of equal opportunity for all, with the net result that Arab citizens are winning more equality of treatment than in years past, despite the deepening political divide.

Regional and International Ramifications

The one-block, right-wing-dominant state could have major bearing on Israel's relations with the United States. Tensions can be expected between an Obama administration that has announced its intention to refocus on Israeli-Palestinian peace, and a Likud-led government.

Such fears are probably exaggerated, because the Obama administration will soon realize that the Hamas-Fatah civil war makes anything other than conflict management unattainable. Therefore, Israel and the US should get along fine, albeit, bumpily. In any case, both will be absorbed by their common major concern – preventing a nuclear Iran. To meet that threat, a one-block dominant right-wing government in Israel is as good as any other.

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