



Centrism in Israeli Politics and the Olmert Government

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Executive Summary: Israeli society is often conceived of as deeply divided, characterized by profound chasms separating Jews and Arabs, secular and religious Jews, Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews, and the right wing from the left wing. This article examines the victory of the centrist Kadima Party in the 2006 Israeli elections, arguing that Kadima's victory suggests that Israel is far less divided than presumed. Kadima's victory, argues Sandler, indicates the existence of a strong political center in Israel. The Jewish State has in fact possessed a strong center since the early stages of its inception and throughout its political history, he notes. The success of Israel's new government may depend on the prime minister's comprehension of this fact and his ability to build upon it.

Introduction

One of the most accepted theses among Israeli political scientists and sociologists is the conception of Israel as a "deeply divided society." This concept posits profound and persistent cleavages within Israeli society between Jews and Arabs, religious and secular, and Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. To these divides, one had to add the dichotomy known as the Right-Left divide, namely those opposing Israeli withdrawal from territories acquired in 1967 vs. those supporting a territorial compromise.

The question I pose here is: to what degree is the Jewish State truly polarized? In light of the success of the centrist Kadima Party in this year's Israeli elections, might the "deeply divided society" concept no longer hold true to the same extent?

Even if the Kadima Party experiment ultimately fails and the party disintegrates, the fact remains that fully one quarter of Israeli society expressed its support for a centrist party that reflects pragmatic positions. Let us not forget that Israel has experienced severe animosity between antagonistic parts of its society over the last decade, culminating in a political assassination.

Kadima's Victory in the 2006 Elections

Early polls predicted over 40 seats for Kadima in the Knesset elections. Kadima polled far below this projection, yet won 29 seats in parliament and became Israel's plurality party. Kadima's victory should not go unacknowledged. Indeed, no self-declared, newly formed

party ever has won so many seats in Knesset elections and risen to become the strongest party on the scene.

The Kadima achievement cannot be credited to the appearance of a charismatic leader, since Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was absent throughout almost all of the campaign due to his illness and the resulting termination of his political career. The post-Sharon era effectively began in mid-January 2006. Ehud Olmert, who came to head the party list, was not a principal contender for prime minister until he replaced Mr. Sharon as head of the government by default.

The government headed by Olmert had no outstanding accomplishments to present before the public, and the continuing plight of uprooted and homeless Gaza Strip settlers did not reflect well on the government's ability to solve a human problem. Nor did the success of Hamas in the Palestinian national elections suggest great political wisdom or prescience on the part of the Olmert government. In addition, several of Kadima's candidates, such as Tzachi Hanegbi, Roni Bar-On and even Mr. Olmert himself, had questionable political track records, including allegations of corruption in their backgrounds. Therefore, the success of Kadima cannot be taken as a natural outcome of an incumbent party with an outstandingly attractive list. One can certainly assume that with Sharon at its head, Kadima would have polled better.

In any case, the unprecedented victory of a new centrist party, and the decline of the two traditional ruling parties, Labor and Likud, to mid-size parties, implied the strong identification of the populace with a centrist position. The fact that Kadima courted religious, Sephardic and even Arab personalities to comprise its list indicated that, for the new party leadership, centrism was inclusive rather than exclusive. In contrast to Shinui, which appealed exclusively to Ashkenazic secular voters, centrism for Kadima went beyond the ideological territorial divide between left and right. It was a preconceived political strategy.

The "New Consensus" Thesis

It is by now an accepted notion that a major factor that assisted the phenomenon of a strong centrist party was the emergence of a "new consensus" in Israel. This consensus could be described as a default position, an emerging consensus that has given up both on the dreams of Jewish control of the historic borders of the Land of Israel, and on the dream of peace with the Palestinians in exchange for a territorial compromise between the two nations. Another indication of this "new consensus" is widespread public support for the erection of the security fence between Israel and the Palestinians. The fence is the symbol of both parting from the historic territories and resignation from the scheme of "territories for peace."

How did this new consensus emerge? One could argue that it is the result of two external events: the 1987 and the 2000 *Intifadas*. The first *Intifada*, which broke out in December 1987, indicated that the Israeli settlement movement, initiated by Menahem Begin and Gush Emunim in 1979, could not overcome the realities of the large Palestinian population that dwelt in the West Bank or Judea and Samaria, as these territories were known in Jewish historic terminology. This reality led to Madrid 1992 and subsequently to Oslo 1993-4.

However, Yasser Arafat's rejection of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's proposal at Camp David in July 2000 brought home to the Israelis a new reality. A territorial compromise based on the 1967 borders would not extricate them from the Palestinian problem. The Palestinians demanded more. They would not forgo their pre-1948 homes, a demand that implied an end to the Jewish state. The dream and promises of Yossi Beilin and his associates collapsed, following the similar fate of the previous dream of preserving the wholeness of the Land of Israel. In short, in 2000, Yasser Arafat corrected the dream of 1993; the dream of full peace with the Palestinians was as messianic as the dream of Israel controlling the Land of Israel from the Sea to the Jordan River.

The Longstanding Existence of an Israeli Center

The implication of the "new consensus" thesis is that the 2006 election results comprise a new development, and hence have no connection to the more basic rudiments of Israeli society. We should consider a more wide-ranging explanation.

While it is plausible that the second *Intifada* contributed to the bringing together of sections along the ideological divide, the solidification of Israeli society may have a deeper and more solid basis. As Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak describe in their celebrated book, *The Origins of the Israeli Polity*, an Israeli center had existed throughout the political history of the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel. This institutional center also gave rise to a political center. Ben-Gurion understood this as head of the MAPAI party in the 1930s, and positioned the predecessor of Labor in the center. As a result, the Socialist party ruled Israel henceforth, until 1977. The Likud learned the lesson of being dogmatic in the wastelands of opposition and moved to the center following its victory in 1977. In 2006, Sharon, with origins and political practice in both camps, pushed aside the two veteran parties and positioned his newly formed party at the hub of the Israel political system.

According to this reading, what allowed each of the major parties to rule Israel was the absence of a broadly based centrist party. As long as it presented positions close to the center, whether on the left or on the right, one of the major parties could win the majority of the Israeli electorate. In 2006, neither of the two major parties proposed a program that could compete with that of the new centrist party – Kadima, established by a prime minister who broke away from his ruling party, which he accused of being dogmatic.

On the left, Labor elected a trade union leader who insisted on a social agenda. Having been identified with the Oslo process and the Geneva Agreement, Labor under Amir Peretz could not present itself as a centrist party. In contrast, Kadima, bringing together leaders from both Likud and Labor, strengthened its image as a genuine centrist party. Even religious voters could vote for such a party since it did not endorse an anticlerical platform like Shinui in 2003. Kadima also did not exclude any party from partnership in the forthcoming coalition.

Conclusion

What are the implications of this line of reasoning? Israel may be a divided society but the divisions are not as deep as many of its enemies would like to imagine. To be sure there have been ideological divisions in the Israeli polity that have deepened at times, but have never deteriorated to an irreconcilable chasm. The deepest divide is between Arabs and Jews. Second in severity is the gap between religious and secular Jews, the strength of which is primarily due to the overlapping religious-secular and right-left territorial positions.

While the first divide is linked to the ongoing Jewish-Palestinian confrontation, the second is basic to Kadima's ability to move ahead with its political agenda. It is precisely at this juncture that Olmert made what may prove to be a significant strategic mistake. Olmert misconstrued the potency and the cardinal role of centrism in the future of his party and failed to build a more balanced coalition by bringing in Israel Beiteinu headed by MK Lieberman and the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party into his government. The repercussions of this mistake may only be felt in the future.

Olmert also came out with a premature and arrogant statement claiming victory in the elections and asking voters for their support so as to increase the measure of Kadima's success. Kadima plunged from a projection of over forty MKs in the polls, to below 30 mandates in the actual ballot. The composition of his coalition may be another blunder.

Olmert allowed himself to be pushed to the left, and it is not surprising that the early polls indicated public disappointment with the newly established government.

In conclusion, the victory of Kadima in March 2006 under the banner of a centrist party indicates that Israel is not a dichotomous polity reflecting a deeply divided society, as it seemed especially after the assassination of PM Yitzhak Rabin. Kadima's relative success denotes a newly emerging consensus, usually best embodied by a centrist agenda. Kadima may represent a new Zeitgeist in Israel but centrism goes beyond this phenomena. The above analysis of the Jewish State supports the notion that it has had a strong center since the early stages of its inception and throughout its political history. The success of the new government and especially that of Prime Minister Olmert may depend on comprehending and building on this political reality.

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