

The 2009 Elections in Israel

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The fragmentation of the Israeli political system, technically based on a highly proportional representative parliamentary structure with a threshold of only 2%, has produced another stalemate. The roots of the problem lie in the institutional structure of the Israeli political system, as well as in the kind of challenges confronted by every coalition government of the country. Israel's institutional structure with its strongly proportional representative system was a product of the pre-state need to integrate various groups of immigrants into the nation-building and state-building process. Since Israel acquired independence, David Ben Gurion, the founding father of the state, and most of his followers, unsuccessfully tried to make the system more majoritarian, subdividing the country into voting districts, raising the thresholds and using various formulae. The last and most important attempt in the 1990s, separating the election of the Prime Minister from the election of parliament members, ended in utter failure: Israel returned to the old system with a slightly higher threshold that helps to diminish the number of parties in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), and facilitates the government coalition building process.

The real dilemma of the Israeli political system is that its highly proportional representative structure, which generates unstable multi-party coalitions, means it is unable to take the decisions needed to forward the peace process, particularly regarding Palestine, in such matters as dismantling settlements in the West Bank, sharing Jerusalem as a two-state capital and the return of Palestinian refugees. And the tensions and instability generated by the intense Arab-Israeli conflict preclude the conditions needed to reform the political system, and create one capable of taking the

decisions necessary for restoring peace. This vicious circle needs to be broken in both directions. As a result of the failed attempt in the 1990s to create a more majoritarian system by electing the Prime Minister directly, the tendency to personalise the political system has increased to the point where many vote for leaders – and not for parties – in a system in which the parties control everything, including the election of the leaders. This has created a kind of negative populism whose main characteristic is that each leader (or main candidate), as was the case with Livni, Netanyahu and Barak in the last election, has to invest much more time and energy defending himself against attacks, rather than proposing action plans to resolve the country's major problems.

The Political Background

The long-term pattern shows that participation in the Israeli elections has declined steadily from 80% two decades ago to percentages slightly above 60% in the first decade of the 21st century.

The corruption and personal scandals affecting central political personalities such as the Primer Minister Ehud Olmert, have contributed to politicians losing prestige and a low voter turnout.

Ehud Olmert's resignation led to primary elections within his party, Kadima, won by his Foreign Affairs Minister Tzipi Livni. Benajmin Netanyahu, the leader of the Likud party, was seen as the most probable winner of the Israeli election. Ehud Barak, as Minister of Defence, was struggling to retain the leadership of the Labour Party, which in 2008 was losing electoral appeal, according to the polls. The elections in fact came as a result of Barak's pressure on Olmert to resign and his threat that if Olmert did not step down, the Labour Party would abandon the ruling coalition and call elections anyway.

The international financial crisis, which had significant repercussions in Israel during the months leading to the elections, was seen as one of the main political issues. The incumbent Finance Minister, Kadima's Roni Bar-On, was the target of much criticism, especially from the Netanyahu camp. His reputation as a neo-liberal financial wizard was damaged by his failure to take the measures necessary to prevent the crisis hitting Israel and by his late reaction to the pension fund problem.

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Relations between Israel and the ruling power in Gaza, Hamas, were never good, but rapidly worsened following the end of the ceasefire between the two sides, on 19 December 2008. Even before that date, armed groups from Hamas and other extremist Palestinian organisations harassed the Israeli population of the Negev areas that border Gaza with the constant firing of small Kassam rockets and mortar shells. In 2008, the Palestinians began firing longer range and more destructive rockets, hitting the city of Ashkelon on several occasions. Israel reacted to these attacks by targeting the launchers and attacking sites thought to be ammunition depots or military bases.

The violence escalated to new heights in the midst of the electoral campaign. The members of the coalition government knew that none could face the election without having seriously addressed the issue of the continuous rocket and mortar firing from Gaza. All attempts to solve this problem by way of the Gaza blockade failed, thanks to hundreds of tunnels dug by Palestinians under their border with Egypt, through which they received regular supplies, including weapons and explosives. Attempts to reach a new ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel, through Egyptian mediation, also failed. The Likud leader used the Gaza border situation to attack the government of Olmert, Livni and Barak, claiming they were incompetent and unable to solve the crisis. In Israel, the lessons of the Second Lebanon War in 2006 have been learnt; with Gaza the army was ready to act.

These were the factors that eventually led to Operation Cast Lead, launched by Israel against Gaza at the end of December 2008. It would be unfair to say that this military operation was decided instrumentally by the incumbent government, which included two of the main candidates to govern the country, Livni and Barak, to improve their chances at the elections. Nevertheless, we could conclude that for these leaders and their political formations it was virtually impossible to face an election while Hamas was stepping up its attacks against the civilian population in southern Israel. The Likud could easily claim that its leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, was the only candidate able to confront Hamas with a firm hand and put an end to the crisis, while the government was presented as indecisive and weak.

This leads to a very paradoxical conclusion: one of the main factors in the Israeli elections was, in fact, Hamas. By increasing pressure on the incumbent Israeli government they were provoking an Israeli military reaction with all the electoral result changes that this might produce. Moreover, by strongly resisting the Israeli attack, or not, and exposing the Palestinian civilian population to the military invasion, with all the terrible consequences these attitudes would entail, Hamas and the other extremist groups in Gaza, were playing into the hands of the Israeli radical right, personified on this occasion by Avigdor Lieberman and his political party, Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel our Home) founded by and traditionally representing immigrants from the former Soviet Union, but now attracting all those radicalised to the extreme right by the security crisis.

The Electoral Campaign

The attitude to this process could be best described as one of boredom and disinterest. The economic crisis would not allow for increased expenses on two accounts. Firstly, in times of crisis and increasing unemployment it was almost impossible to privately raise the necessary funds. Austerity became a natural part of the campaign for all 33 parties participating in the elections. Secondly, the corruption scandals affecting Olmert and other politicians generated a demand for a new style of transparent politics that centred not only on personal honesty, but also public modesty. This point was very well understood and exploited by Tzipi Livni, who has not yet served as Prime Minister and could publicly deliver a perfectly clean record

and relatively modest lifestyle. She expressed these attributes through her message: “the new style of politics”, in some way following Obama’s line for his presidential campaign. The electoral campaign was interrupted for three weeks during the Israeli military onslaught in Gaza.

The resumption of the campaign in mid-January 2009, weeks before the elections, did nothing to reignite the public’s interest. The balance seemed to swing towards Ehud Barak and the Labour party, according to the polls, although this was delusive. Barak, considered by the public to be the best possible Defence Minister given the current circumstances, could not rid himself of the effects of his previous period as Prime Minister, from 1999 to 2001, which badly damaged his reputation as a political leader, but reasserted his military know-how and capacity. Paradoxically, Barak’s authority in his position as Defence Minister nudged the Labour party into fourth place, out of the leading troika and into a deep crisis.

Again, the areas where Tzipi Livni received most criticism were security and her decision-making capacity. Both Likud and Labour played this card, asking the constituency a simple question: In the case of a major security crisis – for instance an Iranian attack on Israel at 03.00 hours in the morning – who would you want as Prime Minister, answering the phone call from the army?

Livni’s response during the last months of the campaign was to take a pro-active attitude against Hamas in Gaza, not only pushing for a military operation but also being unwilling to stop despite international pressure. At the same time, Livni stressed the peace option developed in negotiations with the moderate Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas Abu Mazen, which she herself conducted following the Annapolis US-Israeli-Palestinian summit in November 2007. This line, which fostered a negotiated compromise with the Palestinian moderates and at the same time a harsh military attitude against the extremists, was seen by Livni and the leadership of Kadima as the formula to conquer votes from Israel’s political centre, constituted mainly by a middle class fed up with wars and terror. Livni’s other campaign strategies were based on bolstering her image regarding security by highlighting her past service in Mossad, Israel’s intelligence agency, and asking the population to vote for a woman.

The rising star on the Israeli political horizon was Avigdor Lieberman and Yisrael Beiteinu. Lieberman stressed four points. The first was his campaign slo-

gan: “no citizenship without loyalty”, meaning loyalty to Israel as a Jewish State. He claimed that the Arab population of Israel – Israeli citizens of Palestinian nationality – constituted a fifth column and should be disenfranchised if they did not declare and prove their loyalty to Israel. The second point stressed secularism and attacked the position of the Israeli ultra-Orthodox parties, demanding an opening of the criteria that determines who is a Jew. This is a very attractive point for immigrants – and also secular Israelis – who would like to have civil matters settled outside the rabbinical courts and be allowed civil marriage. The third point is a peace plan with the Palestinians based on a territorial-demographic exchange in which Israel would keep the major concentrations of settlements in the West Bank while receiving in exchange two major concentrations of Israeli Arabs. The fourth point is the reform of the electoral-government system, from parliamentary to presidential, thereby creating the government resolution capacity to solve the country’s major problems, while also eliminating the influence of the Jewish orthodox parties and marginalising the Arab parties.

The indecisive results of the military operation in Gaza, coupled with international criticism, an outburst of anti-Israeli demonstrations, some of which included clear anti-Semitic themes, and Iran’s alleged role in supporting Hamas in Gaza, reawakened another feature of Israeli politics that played in Lieberman’s favour: the existential menace. Polls showed a dramatic increase in support for radical right-wing ideas and their personification in the “strong man” Avigdor Lieberman. From another angle, the same poll results scared sectors of the Israeli voters and there are claims that these were the votes that allowed Tzipi Livni, and Kadima, to obtain the first majority in the Knesset.

An interesting reaction took place within the Arab parties and their electorate in Israel. In general, trends from the last elections showed a growing apathy and a drop in Israeli Arab participation in the country’s electoral processes. The military operation in Gaza contributed to the political alienation felt by large groups of Israel’s Arab population, since the country in which they are citizens attacked their Palestinian co-nationals – and perhaps families and even brothers – in Gaza. Nevertheless, at the last minute, the various Arab political leaders of Israel called their constituency to vote and they did so, counteracting the aforementioned historical trends, but without creating a coordinated Arab bloc in the Knesset.

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Final Results (by number of members of the Knesset elected, by political party: seats)¹

Party	Votes	Double envelopes ²	Seats	Change ³
Kadima	758,032	39,003	28	-1
Likud	729,054	46,405	27	+15
Yisrael Beiteinu	394,577	24,524	15	+4
Labour Party	334,900	20,709	13	-6
Shas	286,300	13,786	11	-1
United Torah Judaism	147,954	5,399	5	-1
Arab List-Ta'al	113,954	1,391	4	0
National Union	112,570	7,942	4	N/A
Hadash	112,130	1,739	4	+1
New Movement-Meretz	99,611	5,980	3	-2
The Jewish Home	96,765	6,479	3	N/A
Balad	83,739	984	3	0

¹ Electoral threshold: 67,470 votes. 13 out of 33 parties participating in the election reached the threshold and are represented in the Knesset. Votes are normal votes on election day – February 10, 2009.

² Double envelopes are votes of Israeli diplomats abroad, sailors at sea, and soldiers (regular army and reservists) who voted on the day of the election or preceding days. N/A means "no antecedent", since both National Union and Jewish Home are splinters of the former National Religious Party, representing religious nationalism and settlers in the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights.

³ Change shows an increase or decrease in the number of representatives for each party, compared with the last Knesset term. The source is the Knesset Electoral Committee and the results are seen as final but not yet official.

The Results

Who won the Israeli election? This is a very difficult question to answer.

We know that there is a shift to the right associated with the ongoing problem between Israel and Gaza, and an Iranian link that strengthens existing feelings of an existential menace. The ambivalent attitudes of the left and centre-left wing parties – Meretz and Labour – towards the military operation in Gaza – initially offering their complete support, and later morally criticising it and demanding the operation be stopped – projected a confused image that cost these parties many votes.

In a system heavily based on proportional representation, nobody really wins a parliamentary election and the possible political coalitions are no less important than the total number of votes obtained by each party. This has been proved true again since Tzipi Livni, after a brilliant end to her and Kadima's electoral campaign, achieved the first majority in the Knesset, electing 28 representatives. Netanyahu and the Likud came second with 27 representatives to the Knesset, Lieberman and Yisrael Beiteinu third, with 15 representatives to the Knesset. Barak and the Labour party were able to send only 13 representatives to the Knesset (losing a third of its electoral strength).

The coalition forming process was fully underway. The Israeli President, Shimon Peres held consultations with the political leaders in order to decide who would be asked to form the next coalition government. Here, the right-wing bloc led by Likud and Netanyahu had better possibilities than Livni and Kadima, since it could count on the support of at least 65 of the 120 members of the Knesset.

Lieberman and Yisrael Beiteinu had become the pivotal political party and wielded great leverage over the coalition formation, assuming Netanyahu, Livni and Barak did not decide to form a national unity coalition, which would exclude Lieberman and Yisrael Beiteinu from power. This possibility was not as utopian as it may seem. It depended on the messages sent out from Washington and the rest of the world. Incorporating Avigdor Lieberman into the government of Israel implied a political cost in Washington, where President Obama had heralded a new era, proclaimed the Middle East peace process as a major item on the US foreign policy agenda and was displaying no sympathy whatsoever for the radical right, at home or abroad.

Finally, Netanyahu formed the 32nd Israeli government becoming Prime Minister for a second time. It was a 30-minister strong coalition government that was supported by 69 Knesset members in the approval vote on March 31 2009. The ruling coalition was formed by the Likud, led by Netanyahu, Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Lieberman as Foreign Affairs Minister, the Labour Party, led by Barak as Defence Minister, the Sephardic-Orthodox party Shas, led by Eli Yishai as Minister of Internal Affairs and smaller parties such as the nationalist religious Jewish Home (HaBayit Hayehudi) and the Ashkenazi-Orthodox party United Torah Judaism. All these elements contributed to worsening the Israeli-Arab conflict and increasing Iranian intervention. They constitute signs that the time for change in Israel is nearing, which may take place sooner than expected thanks to a combination of international and internal pressure. Leaving things as they are means indecision and deepening crises that no one wants to experience.