

# ELECTIONS TO TEST ISRAELI PRAGMATISM

## Gerald Steinberg

For the third time in six years, Israelis are going to the polls to elect a new Knesset and government. Following Ehud Olmert's resignation as head of the centrist Kadima party, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni successfully negotiated an agreement with the Labor party to maintain their current partnership. But the leaders of the third major element in the coalition – the Shas party – calculated that its interests would be best served by going to elections in the first few months of 2009.

Shas is the largest of the sectoral parties – religious, Arab, Druze, pensioners, etc. – many of which have a handful of seats, and are needed, in different combinations, to sustain a government supported by over half of the 120 member Knesset. But the core comes from one of the three larger parties – Likud, Labor and, if it holds together, Kadima. And it is here that most of the competition takes place.

According to the polls, Likud is likely to emerge as the largest party, and Benjamin Netanyahu will again be Prime Minister. But, in contrast to 1996, when Netanyahu took office, the Left and Right division is of limited significance. After the destructive failure of the Oslo process and Palestinian mass terror campaign (the so-called second Intifada), most Israelis are cynical about grand peace hopes. They realize that the weak Palestinian leadership is incapable of ending generations of rejectionism and violence. While media reports claimed that Livni's coalition negotiations with Shas failed in part due to differences on Jerusalem's future, this was mostly spin.

Instead, with no realistic end to the conflict on the horizon, the contest for voters will focus on ethics in government (following the scandal-plagued Olmert era) and on which leader, party and policies can prevent the world-wide economic crisis from engulfing Israel.

The differences between Kadima, Likud and Labor in these dimensions are also quite narrow. The Labor party has abandoned the stifling socialism of the 1950s, while Netanyahu avoided the excesses of America's irresponsible capitalism. As a result, personalities will be important – and in this realm, Livni's "clean" record and cooperative attitude will contrast with the remaining charisma generated by Netanyahu and Labor leader Ehud Barak.

Barak, the ex-IDF Chief of Staff, former Prime Minister, and current Defense Minister, will emphasize his military experience in confronting the Iranian nuclear threat, Hizbollah, and Hamas. But the Labor party that Barak heads is divided and in precipitous decline, along with the trade unions (controlled by a small group of paid public employees who use monopoly power to extract high wages). Netanyahu will match Barak's emphasis on the security dimension, contrasting his record against Palestinian terror with Livni's role in the failed strategy employed during the 2006 Lebanon War.

In other words, major changes are unlikely to emerge from the 2009 elections, and fragile coalition governments can be expected to remain the norm. With the exception of Livni's surprising rise, most Israeli politicians have been around for a long time, with few accomplishments and little public enthusiasm. The late 19th century Polish version of democracy that was adopted by the early Zionists to encompass as many groups as possible has outlived its usefulness.

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