

Israeli Politics: What's Next?

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As Israel enters 5768, the domestic political scene is more fluid and unpredictable than at any other time since independence 60 years ago. An election could suddenly be called following the final report on the Second Lebanon War or a corruption indictment, or they may not occur until 2010. But regardless of when a vote is called, it's clear that Israel is in a leadership crisis, like many other democracies, but with much higher stakes.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his Kadima party had record low poll ratings after the perceived mishandling of the 2006 Lebanon War, ongoing policy investigations, and the failure of the Gaza disengagement that was the core of Kadima's platform. While Olmert is hoping that renewed peace talks with the remnants of the Palestinian Authority led by President Mahmoud Abbas will revive his position, this is not likely.

But the absence of popular alternatives, both within his own party and elsewhere, has kept Olmert in power. The two leading candidates to replace him are both former prime ministers whose own leadership difficulties led to their defeats.

Benjamin Netanyahu heads a Likud party that was divided by disengagement from Gaza and trounced in the 2006 elections. With the daily rocket attacks from "Hamastan" (Gaza), Netanyahu emerges as the first choice for prime minister in public opinion polls, but many Israelis are hesitant given his previous record. At the same time, Likud lacks the votes in the Knesset to carry a non-confidence vote and force the government to resign.

In what remains of the Israeli centre-left, in the form of the Labour Party, the experimental emphasis on social and economic policy, led by the former head of the Histadrut, Amir Peretz, was also a disaster.

Peretz appeared to be primarily interested in the well-off groups in the unions, and the Second Lebanon War showed that Israel needs leaders with serious security experience. In the internal leadership race in July 2007, Peretz and others, including Ami Ayalon, were defeated by former prime minister and Israel Defence Forces head Ehud Barak, who immediately assumed responsibility for the defence portfolio.

If elections are held in late 2007 or 2008 these three leaders will be the candidates for prime minister, unless Olmert is forced out. And many Israelis from different social sectors will find all three unappealing. This situation reflects the stagnant Israeli political system. Highly qualified individuals have little chance to break through the massive barriers to entry. This party-based structure was chosen by the early Zionist congresses in order to accommodate a myriad of groups and ideologies that spread from America to Russia and beyond, and party hacks who now control the system have rebuffed all efforts at change.

But politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and within the next few years, a new group of Israeli leaders can be expected emerge and build a new and more relevant structure.

Some will be former military leaders untainted by scandals and with visions that combine Israel's Jewish renaissance with strong security credentials. This group includes Moshe Ya'alon and Uzi Dayan, and may grow considerably in the post-Lebanon war shake-up. Neither has a strong party base, but could be quickly adopted by any of the main groups, or perhaps lead another attempt to create a pragmatic Zionist core.

In addition, many hi-tech entrepreneurs, some of whom began their work in the army, have been sitting on the political sidelines, but they are being pressed to take a more active role.

Within Kadima, Foreign Minister Tzippi Livni is widely admired as intelligent and sincere, but she lacks the experience to hold Israel's top position and will require many more years to gain this background. And if Kadima collapses, she will have trouble finding a political home.

In other words, while the Israeli leadership crisis is serious, when it ends, Israel is likely to emerge reinvigorated and able to chart its course with greater success.