

Israeli Elections: What Happened?

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What the Hell has happened?

THE MOST dramatic and the most boring election campaign in our history has mercifully come to an end. Israel looks in the mirror and asks itself: What the hell has happened?

On the way to the ballot box, in the center of Tel-Aviv, I could not detect the slightest sign that this was election day. Generally, elections in Israel are a passionate affair. Posters everywhere, thousands of slogan-covered cars rushing around ferrying voters to the ballot stations, a lot of noise.

This time - nothing. An eerie silence. Less than two thirds of the registered citizens did actually take the trouble to vote. Politicians of all stripes are detested, democracy despised among the young, whole sectors estranged. Those who decided not to vote, but at the last moment relented, voted for the Pensioners' List, which jumped from nothing to an astonishing seven seats.

This was a real protest vote. Even young people told themselves: Instead of throwing our vote away, let's do them a favor. Old people, sick people (including the terminally ill), handicapped people and the entire health and education systems were the victims of the Thatcherite economic policies of Netanyahu, backed by Sharon, which Shimon Peres (of all people) called "swinish".

That vote was a curiosity. But what happened in the main arena?

AT THE beginning of the campaign I wrote that the whole of the political system was moving to the left.

Many thought that that was wishful thinking, sadly removed from reality. Now it has actually happened.

The main result of these elections is that the hold of the nationalistic-religious bloc, which has dominated Israel for more than a generation, has been broken. All those who announced that the Left is dead and that Israel is condemned to right-wing rule for a long, long time have been proved wrong.

All the right-wing parties together won 32* seats, the religious parties 19. With 51 of the 120 seats in the Knesset, the rightist-religious wing cannot block all moves towards peace any more.

This is a turning point. The dream of a Greater Israel, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, is dead.

Significantly, the “National Union”, the party that is completely identified with the settlers, has won only 9 seats – more or less like last time. After all the heart-rending drama of the destruction of the Gaza settlements, the settlers remain as unpopular as ever. They have lost the decisive battle for public opinion.

Netanyahu declared that the elections were going to be a “national referendum” on the withdrawal from the West Bank. Well. It was – and the public overwhelmingly voted “Yes”.

The main victim is Netanyahu himself. The Likud has collapsed. For the first time since its founding by Ariel Sharon in 1973, it has been subjected to the humiliation of being the fifth (!) party in the Knesset.

The heartfelt joy about this rout of the Right is tempered by a very dangerous development: the rise of Avigdor Lieberman’s “Israel our Home” party, a mutation of the Right with openly fascist tendencies.

Lieberman, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union and himself a settler, draws his main strength from the “Russian” community, which is almost uniformly extremely nationalistic. He calls for the expulsion of all Arabs (a fifth of Israel’s population), ostensibly in a swap of territories, but the message is clear. There are also the usual hallmarks of such a party: the cult of the Leader, a call for “law and order”, intense hatred for “the enemy” both within and without. This man got 12 seats and has overtaken Netanyahu. His main slogan “Da Lieberman” (“Yes Lieberman” in Russian) reminds one of similar historical salutes.

For those who are interested: the fascist group that called for my murder as part of their election program has failed to attain the 2% necessary to gain entry into the Knesset. But, of course, an assassin does not need 2% to follow such a call. (I would like to use this occasion to express my heartfelt thanks to all those around the world who expressed their solidarity.)

THE JOYFUL scenes at the Labor Party’s Headquarters may seem at first glance exaggerated. After all, the party got only 20 seats, as against 19 last time (to which must be added the three of the small party led by Amir Peretz at the time). But the numbers do not tell the whole story.

First of all, the political implications are far-reaching. In parliament, it is not only the raw numbers which count, but also their location on the political map. In the next Knesset, any coalition without the Labor Party has become impractical, if not completely impossible. Amir Peretz is going to be the most important person in the next cabinet, after Ehud Olmert.

But there is more to it than that. Peretz, the first “oriental” Jewish leader of any major Israeli party, has overcome the historic rejection of Labor by the immigrants from Muslim countries and their offspring. He has destroyed the established equation of Oriental = poor = Right as against Ashkenazi = well-to-do = Left.

This has not yet found its full expression in the voting. The increase in Oriental voters for Labor has been only incremental. But no one who has seen how Peretz was received in the open markets, until now fortresses of the Likud, can have any doubt that something fundamental has changed.

And most important, when Peretz arrived on the scene, hardly three months ago, Labor was

a walking corpse. Now it is alive, vibrant, hungry for action. It's called leadership, and it's there. Peretz is on his way to being a viable candidate for Prime Minister in the next elections. Until then, he certainly will have a major impact both on social affairs and the peace process.

THAT IS, of course, the main question: Can the next government bring us closer to peace?

Kadima has won the elections, but is not happy. When it was founded by Sharon, it expected 45 seats. The sky was the limit. Now it has to be satisfied with a measly 28 seats, enough to head the government but not enough to dictate policy.

In his victory speech, Olmert called on Mahmoud Abbas to make peace. But this is an empty gesture. No Palestinian could possibly accept the terms Olmert has in mind. So, if the Palestinians don't show that they are "partners", Olmert wants to "establish Israel's permanent borders unilaterally", meaning that he wants to annex something between 15% and 50% of the West Bank.

It is doubtful whether Peretz can impose another policy. Possibly, the whole question will be postponed, under the pretext that the social crisis has to be addressed first. In the meantime, the fight against the Palestinians will go on.

It is up to the peace movement to change this. The elections show that Israeli public opinion wants an end to the conflict, that it rejects the dreams of the settlers and their allies, that it seeks a solution. We have contributed to this change. Now it is our job to show that Olmert's unilateral peace is no peace at all and will not lead to a solution.

On our election day, the new Palestinian government was confirmed by its Parliament. With this government we can and must negotiate. At the moment, the majority in Israel is not yet ready for that. But the election results show that we are on the way.

* All numbers mentioned in this article are those published with 97% of the votes counted. There may be slight changes in the final count.

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