

Israel: The drive to normality and separation

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There are 120 members in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. The main loser is definitely the Likud which collapsed from 40 MKs to 11. Even if one takes into consideration the strengthening of the far-right, which almost doubled its votes (from 12 to 21), the Israeli Right suffered a major defeat, at the expense of the Center, which doubled the number of its deputies: Kadima got 28 and the anonymous list of the Pensioners - the surprise of the elections - got seven.

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The Labor Party succeeded in limiting the damages provoked by the creation of Kadima and the departure of many of its leaders, and lost only 10% of its representatives: 20 MKs instead of 22. The weakening of Meretz, which has been a continuous phenomenon since 1999, didn't stop: its representation passed from six MKs to four.

The fundamentalist parties (Shas and Yahadut HaTora) raised their MKs from 16 to 19, which confirms their stable social basis among the Jewish public. Despite a high abstention (almost 45%), the Arab lists strengthened their representation in the Israeli parliament: from eight to ten MKs.

Less than two third of the Israeli electorate made the effort to vote. This figure indicates the first major characteristic of the Israeli election: an unquestionable lack of passion and a relative lack of interest. The election campaign which ended a few days ago was the most boring since 1969, and the results confirm that the Israeli public is tired of internal confrontations and ultra-nationalist rhetoric. The success of acting prime-minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima party is the direct product of the Israeli public aspiration to a mainstream politics, both on the political and the social levels.

A relative success for Kadima

The 28 seats of Kadima makes it the biggest party in the new Knesset, and its leader, Ehud Olmert, the next Prime Minister. However, the success of Kadima is relative. Two months ago, the public opinion polls were predicting 45 seats to Kadima! With the departure of Ariel Sharon, started a process of erosion, and one can agree with the evaluation of several Israeli analysts who said yesterday night that if the elections would have been a month later, the Labor Party may have won the elections.

For, despite the treason of Shimon Peres and many other Labor leaders who decided to join Kadima and despite a racist campaign against the Moroccan background of Amir Peretz, its young and combative new leader, the Labor Party managed to more or less keep its score of 2003, and become the second largest group in the new parliament.

The success of Kadima and the collapse of the Likud are the direct result of the aspiration of the Israeli population's to normalization and its reluctance to follow hard-liners. The 32 seats of the Right represent the hard-line quarter of the Israeli people, whilst the 34 seats of the Labor Party, Meretz and the 3 Arab lists, represent the peace-oriented quarter. Half of the Israeli public is motivated neither by the Greater Israel nor by peace, but by a strong aspiration to separation, whether through negotiations or unilaterally imposed on the Palestinians.

Ehud Olmert - and Ariel Sharon before him - understood the general Israeli tiredness of the "permanent preventive war" discourse of Netanyahu and the Right in general. He knew that a "centrist" position would be popular, and did his best to develop the sense of a break with the status-quo, identified with the perpetuation of the conflict, independently of the Palestinian position and deeds.

"We will fix borders between us and the Palestinians", "We will hasten separation", "we will continue the process of unilateral separation" were the main electoral slogans of Kadima, to which the Likud could only answer: "Olmert endangers Israel, we need a strong leader against Hamas!" - precisely the kind of language most of the Israelis are tired of.

No to ultra-liberalism

Normalization for Israeli voters is not only separation from the Palestinians, but also a reverse of the savage neo-liberal economic policies implemented in the last decade by Netanyahu... and Olmert, which brought a quarter of the population under the poverty line. The success of the pensioners list is living proof that many Israeli citizens refuse an economic policy which ignores the basic needs of the great majority of the population. The success of Shas, which conducted its campaign on socio-economical issues and strengthened substantially its vote, is further evidence that the Israeli public expect that the new government will initiate a radical turn towards the millions of new poor in Israel.

Amir Peretz deserves the credit of "socializing" the campaign. From the moment the former General Secretary of the Histadrut was elected as the leader of the Labor Party, and declared war on the neo-liberal economics, all the candidates were obliged to at least pay lip service to social reforms, including even Ehud Olmert who replaced Netanyahu as Minister of Finance and continued his criminal policy.

The relatively good result of the Labor Party is definitely connected to the "social campaign" led by Amir Peretz, and his credibility as someone challenging "Netanyahu" economics. The Labor leader is now demanding the Finances portfolio in the next government, in order to guarantee a "better distribution of national resources".

Despite last-moment "social" commitments by Kadima leaders, it is hard to believe that Ehud Olmert, who, as Finance Minister implemented the brutal neo-liberal economic policy, and is well-known for his personal relations with the corporate elites, will permit putting the economy in the hands of someone whom he has already described as a "dangerous populist". Someone who the economic editor of Ha'aretz describes as a communist.

The vote of the Palestinian minority

Despite the fact that almost half of the Palestinian voters didn't participate in the elections, the three "Arab lists" succeeded to increase their representation by 25%. If the rate of Palestinian

participation would have been the same as among the Jewish public, the number of independent Palestinian MKs may have been 12, i.e. 10% of the Israeli parliament.

The main winner is the Arab United List, composed of moderate Islamists and nationalist notables with four MKs. The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, led by the Israeli Communist Party (Hadash), and the National Democratic Alliance (Balad) both received three MKs each.

Although the general assessment is that since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the Arab representatives have been unable to use the Knesset to improve their catastrophic situation, this result shows that the majority of the Palestinian minority in Israel is, in fact, interested in asserting its national existence and its political and social aspirations through its own independent national representatives. Such a demonstration is particularly important at a time when the racist far-right has strengthened its representation in the Knesset and, when public anti-Arab discourse is considered more acceptable than at any time in the past.

Thirty years after Land Day (30th March), the hard won achievements of the Palestinians between 1980 - 1996 to combat discrimination, seem mainly to have vanished.

The new government

Ehud Olmert has plenty of options with whom to form a new coalition, based on his strong parliamentary majority. Almost every Jewish party has announced its will to be part of the new coalition, from the far-right "Israel is our Home" party of Avigdor Lieberman, described as 'fascist' by former Meretz minister Yossi Sarid, to the left wing Meretz party.

This government will have two main objectives: to (slightly) improve the living conditions of the majority of the Israeli population and to continue the process of unilateral redeployment in the West Bank. These two objectives are widely supported among the Israeli public and in the new Knesset.

The main question is whether Ehud Olmert will have the determination to confront those who oppose these policies: on the one hand the big Israeli corporations, the World Bank and the captains of the Israeli economic establishment who are the hard core of his own party, and, on the other hand, the right-wing parties who, despite their defeat, are still able to mobilize hundred of thousands of demonstrators against any change which may reduce Israeli control in the Occupied Territories.

Unlike Ariel Sharon, who was ready to confront any kind of external pressure, Ehud Olmert is known as a politician whom it is easy to put pressure. In other words, the new government, which may include many parties with contradictory agendas, will be an arena for strong confrontation, on political as well as socio-economic issues. Those who expected that Israel was about to enter a new period of stability are dead wrong.

P.S.

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