Election Report

ISRAEL
Legislative Elections 22 January 2013

Natalia Perez

Observatorio Político y Electoral del Mundo Árabe y Musulmán
Taller de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

www.observatorioelectoral.es
www.opemam.org

www.opemam.org

Background:

On 22 January 2013 Israel held legislative elections, nine months ahead of schedule. They were brought forward after the government foresaw that it would fail to obtain parliamentary backing for the 2013 budget. However, the fact that prime minister called the elections in October 2012, long before the March deadline for the budget to be passed, gave rise to other interpretations. Opinion polls forecast an easy victory for the the alliance at the head of the executive formed by Likud and Israel Our Home (Yisrael Beitenu), the virtual disappearance of Kadima, the winner of the last election, and Labour's failure to again become a party capable of forming a government. Bringing the elections forward would allow Benjamin Netanyahu to change some of his cabinet members without going through a government crisis. It would also grant him another term in office for his coalition while the opposition was still weak. But above all, it would it would allow him to carry through on his promise to act firmly against the threat of a nuclear Iran.

Soon however, the forecasts began to change. Netanyahu had asked Israelis for their unambiguous support to tackle the Iranian question – a matter of minor concern to voters who were more concerned about social and economic problems.[1] Disagreeing with the prime minister's Iranian 'obsession' and concerned at the prospect of a strong Likud-led government in coalition with the '*Russian'* Israel Our Home, led some of the faithful of the right's main party to change their vote. The most nationalist among them are wary of Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the Russian immigrants, who they accuse of undermining the Jewish character of the state with his demands for secular legislation, in addition to weakening the country with his proposals for an accord with the Palestinian National Authority that would allow Israel to conserve the major settlements on the West Bank in exchange for areas of Israel with a Palestinian-majority population. Some of these nationalist Likud supporters moved towards Jewish Home, whose leader, Nafatali Bennett, has not renounced speaking of a Greater Israel - something Netanyahu, in order to conserve his more centrist voters, has. This party, a successor of the National Religious Party, has successfully gone beyond its old nationalist religious electorate to embrace a more secular one, taking advantage of the disappearance of the far-right coalition National Union.

Meanwhile, some of Likud's more centrist voters, alarmed at the party's swing to the right in its primaries[2], became attracted by a popular television presenter who had left journalism to found a centrist party, There is a Future (Yesh Atid). This party barely mentioned the peace process, focussing its message instead on the things that concern the majority of Israeli voters: on the one hand, economic issues, particularly high housing prices and increasing living

---

[1] According to a survey published on January 18th 2013 by Haaretz, 47% of Israelis believed social and economic problems to be the most important considerations when voting, while only 10% said that Iran was their main concern.

[2] In Likud's primaries on November 25th 2012 the more centrist politicians of the party were relegated out of the first twenty places on the party list. The coalition agreement with Israel Our Home saw one of that party's candidates placed after every two Likud candidates.

costs; on the other hand, social issues, especially legislation that favours ultra-Orthodox Jews (*haredim*). The major electoral promise of the party leader Yair Lapid, was to put an end to the exemptions that allow the *haredim* not to serve in the army, and oblige every citizen to do either military or national civilian service. Lapid made no secret of his aim to make it into Netanyahu's cabinet in order to influence the government's decisions and impose a universal draft. With his direct and sincere rhetoric and a secular, centrist political programme, he became the star of these elections.

Quantitative indices of democracy:

Israel was classified in the following democratic performance rankings just before these elections:

Measurement	Name and year of report or database	Institution	Index	Points, ranking and classification
Political rights and freedom	Freedom House Report 2013	Freedom House (FH)	PR: political rights CL: civil liberties	PR: 1, CL: 2 (Scale of 1, free to 7, not free) Classification: Free
Consolidation of authoritarian and democratic institutions	Polity IV 2010	Center for International Development and Conflict Management, Univ. of Maryland	Democracy: consolidation of democratic institutions Autocracy: authoritarian consolidation Polity: synthesis of both	Democracy: 10 Autocracy: 0 Polity: 10 (Scale of +10, very democratic to -10, very authoritarian) Classification: Very democratic
Perception of corruption	Transparency International Corruption Perception Index 2012	Transparency International	TICPI: Perception of corruption index	TICPI: 60 points out of 100, (Scale of 0 very corrupt to 100 not at all corrupt) Ranking: 39 out of 176 countries Transparent
Democracy, including press status and corruption	World Democracy Audit Dec. 2012	World Audit	World Democracy Rank: political freedom (FH) + press and corruption (TI)	World Democracy Ranking: 31 out of 150 countries, division 2 out of 4

Definition of the electoral and party systems:

There were some 5.6 million potential voters in these elections, 10 per cent of whom did not intend to vote because they live abroad. Postal voting does not exist in Israel. Nor does the possibility of voting in embassies and consulates abroad, meaning that Israeli expatriates cannot vote unless they are employees of embassies and consulates, staff of the Jewish Agency, the Jewish National

Fund or the World Zionist Organization. The spouses and children under 20 of these expatriates may also vote.

Israel's parliament has 120 seats which are totally renewed every four years. Citizens over the age of 18 may vote in elections (with some exceptions specified by law) while those over the age of 21 may run for parliament (as well as the legal exemptions there are several incompatibilities with other posts). Voters cast a single vote, with the entire country forming just one constituency. Each party fields a closed list of candidates and seats are distributed proportionally using the d'Hondt method, with a 2 per cent threshold for parties to make it into parliament. Prior to the elections parties may agree to sum the surplus votes of each party so that the combined surplus votes – if sufficient to win another seat – go to the party with the higher number of surplus votes (such pacts must be communicated to the Central Elections Committee in charge of supervising the elections).[3]

Two party systems coexist in Israel: a multiparty system for entry to parliament and a two-party system to decide the prime minister. In its sixty-five year history, only the Labour Party and Likud have headed the government (as well as Kadima on one occasion), although many parties have had the ability to make or unmake governments. As no party has ever won an absolute majority in elections, coalition governments have been the norm, with between three and nine parties in each cabinet. This has allowed small and medium-sized parties not only a share of ministerial portfolios but also the ability to impose and hamper different policies.

Religious parties have been present in practically every cabinet, as, ever since they first made it into parliament in 1996, have parties oriented towards the electorate of Russian immigrants. Orthodox Jews, Russian Jews and Arabs are the three types of sectarian groupings currently present on the Israeli political scene, alongside parties of an ideological bent which range from the radical left to the extreme right. The sectarian nature of the Russian and Orthodox parties allows them to form part of any government, which fits with their goal of satisfying the key demands of their electorates. The so-called Arab parties – some of which define themselves as Arab Jews and do not attend exclusively to an electorate of Palestinian origin – have never been present in any Israeli cabinet.

Impact of the electoral formula and constituency size on the elections

Having just one electoral district and a low electoral threshold of just 2 per cent makes the Israeli electoral system extremely proportional. This is of the utmost importance in a country where immigration has shaped the structure of the population and where society is divided along the lines of one's origins. Both issues have resulted in unequal levels of economic and social assimilation,

---

[3] Seven accords were signed for these elections: Likud-Israel Our Home and Jewish Home, the Labour Party and There is a Future, The Movement and Meretz, United Torah Judaism and Shas, Kadima and Am Shalem, National Democratic Aliance and Hadash, and another one between two lists that gain access to parliament.

different backgrounds and a distinct set of problems from one socio-economic group to another. The interplay between a highly proportional electoral system and an immensely fragmented society leads to a high number of political parties obtaining parliamentary representation, historically between ten and fifteen for only 120 seats. Since the nineties the electoral threshold has been raised on two occasions, so as to avoid lists in the House with only one seat. Meanwhile, since 1992 the most voted-for party has never reached 30 per cent of the total votes cast (although in 2003, Likud came close, with 29.4 per cent). In the last two elections the winning party has done so with 22 per cent of the vote, which equates to some 30 seats.

Results:

Enrolled voters: 5,656,705
Votes cast: 3,833,646
Official turnout: 67.7%
Valid ballots: 3,792,742
Spoiled ballots: 40,904

Official results of Israeli legislative elections, 22 January 2013:

Party	N° votes	Share of votes	Seats	Share in 2009	Seats in 2009
Likud-Israel Our Home	885,163	23.34%	31	33.3[4]	42[4]
Future Party (Yesh Atid)	543,458	14.33%	19	-	-
Labour Party	432,118	11.39%	15	9.9	13
Jewish Home	345,985	9.12%	12	2.9	3
Shas	331,868	8.75%	11	8.5	11
United Torah Judaism	195,892	5.16%	7	4.4	5
The Movement (Hatenua)	189,167	4.99%	6	-	-
Meretz	172,403	4.55%	6	3.0	3
United Arab List	138,450	3.65%	4	3.4	4
Hadash	113,439	2.99%	4	3.3	4
National Dem. Assembly (Balad)	97,030	2.56%	3	2.5	3
Kadima	78,974	2.08%	2	22.5	28

Source: The Central Elections Committee, www.bechirot.gov.il, 17 March 2013.

The parties that were part of the outgoing government are marked in blue while the opposition parties are marked in red. The Labour party quit the government mid-term.

Qualitative analysis of the elections

Participation:
The 67.8 per cent turnout was slightly higher than that of previous elections (64.7 per cent in 2009 and 63.5 per cent in 2006). Since 2001 turnout has never reached 70 per cent, while before then it was consistently above 78

---

[4] Likud won 21,6% of the votes, 27 seats, and Israel Our Home 11,7% of the votes, 15 seats.

per cent. Although the Israeli media forecast that participation among Israelis of Palestinian descent would fall, in fact it rose by 3 per cent - at the same rate as it did among Jewish voters. Nonetheless, at just 56 per cent, their turnout is still eleven points lower than the general turnout.[5] The disaffection of the Arab population only began at the turn of this century: in 1999 there was only three percentage points difference. However, in October 2000, shortly before the 2001 elections, three citizens of Palestinian descent died in clashes with the army after the second Intifada broke out.

Competition:

Thirty-two parties took part in these elections. Only 12 passed the 2 per cent threshold, leaving the remaining 12 outside of parliament. Of those 20, only 3 managed to garner more than 1 per cent of the vote, and 15 scored less than 0.5 per cent. The party that came closest to making it into parliament was the far right-wing party, Strength for Israel, which only needed 15,000 more votes. The least voted-for party won only 461 votes. All in all, around 250,000 votes or 7 per cent of the total, went to parties that did not make it into parliament - roughly equivalent to nine seats. Given that only 100,000 such votes were wasted in the last elections, this reflects a growing voter discontent vis-à-vis traditional parties.

Transparency:

In Israel elections are transparent, without serious allegations of fraud. The counting of the votes is public and quick, and the morning after Israelis already have the first results – which remain unofficial until the ballots of the military and voters outside of Israel have been counted.[6] The most serious allegations against the election's fairness usually come from the so-called Arab parties who denounce their harassment from the extreme-right Jewish parties. The latter always call on the Central Elections Committee to prohibit the former's participation, alleging their violation of a law prohibiting parties or persons running for office if their goals or actions imply "negation of the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, incitement to racism, (or) support for armed struggle by a hostile state or a terrorist organization against the State of Israel"[7].

The elections were held on a Tuesday, in the middle of a short week given that both election day and the Friday were public holidays. Although in the end all candidates and parties were allowed to run, the Central Elections Committee initially disqualified Hanin Zoabi, a Knesset member from the Arab party Balad, a decision overturned by the Supreme Court. The Committee also handled other requests for disqualification, although none were successful. These included the recurrent appeals against the Arab parties Balad and Ra'am-Ta'al, and the now habitual appeal against the extreme right list, Strength for Israel. This time it was also asked to prohibit the religious United Torah Judaism and Shas, for not having women on their lists. What the Committee did do was bring various

---

[5] Jerusalem Post, January 25th 2013.
[6] Officials and soldiers on duty may vote in their military bases, while those in transit can do it in any army base. Voting in these cases can begin up to 72 hours before election day.
[7] Basic Law, Israeli Parliament

parties into line for violations of the election law and order the withdrawal of several television ads which were judged racist or offensive.

Representation and debate:

Many Israeli political parties (Likud, Labour, Meretz and others) choose their leaders and candidates through primaries. In others (such as in Israel Our Home), the leader and the party central committees decide the makeup of the electoral lists. In religious parties, a group of prominent rabbis choose the political leadership, who must always submit to their authority and consult them on how to act in Parliament. On this occasion, the ultra-Orthodox and Sephardic Shas party chose a three-man political leadership both to avoid internal rifts and to allow it to express different opinions at a difficult time politically - after Netanyahu expressed his desire not to depend on the party to form his next government.

There were no television debates between the main political leaders this year. The universal draft was at the centre of the electoral campaign thanks to the popular Yair Lapid, who had it as his main promise for these elections. This led the right-wing Naftali Bennett to back Lapid's demands, without putting aside his nationalist message. This in turn left Netanyahu's main campaign message – preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons at all costs – progressively relegated by the news media who focussed almost all their attention on Lapid's proposal. But as the prime minister had spent months trying to cool down the public debate following the Supreme Court's decision to put an end to the *haredim* exemptions, he could hardly back Lapid's plan now.

Openness:

Given the strength of the governing Likud and Israel Our Home coalition, these elections did not herald any change in direction for the country. This is why Netanyahu decided to call a snap election – one year ahead of schedule – to convert his popular support into a parliamentary advantage and a new government which he could fully control. His attempt was to fail however, with the public displaying a preference for change by backing two recent arrivals to the political stage: Yair Lapid and his There is a Future (Yesh Atid), and Naftali Bennet with a renewed Jewish Home. Tzipi Livni's new party, The Movement (Hatnua), also won entry to Parliament, although with a very modest outcome. Meanwhile, in a display of just how fickle the Israeli party system is, Kadima, which was the most-voted party in the last two elections, collapsed from its 28 seats and a 22,5 per cent of the votes in 2009 to just 2 seats and merely 2.08 per cent. Kadima was not the only party to splinter over the course of the last three years; the far-right coalition National Union, which had 4 seats, also did so and its heir, Strength for Israel, was unable to make it back into the House.

Significance:

These elections did not seem of much consequence beforehand. The ruling coalition's dominance of Israeli politics and Kadima's fragmentation to the point of disappearance, as well as the certainty that Benjamin Netanyahu would continue to be prime minister, left just one question mark over these elections: whether he would strengthen his control over the government and diminish the role of religious and far-right parties.

The decision to bring the elections forward so as to strengthen his government backfired on the Likud leader, who in coalition with Israel Our Home, lost 11 of the seats they had. The party to their right, Jewish Home, increased its presence in parliament, and with 12 seats is in a position to make major policy demands in exchange for its presence in the government. There is a Future (Yesh Atid), as the party with the second highest vote, is in the same boat. With his 19 seats, party leader Yair Lapid will hope to enforce his commitment to "share the burden". Both Bennett and Lapid are the rising stars in Israeli politics, and they won't make things easy for Netanyahu if he wants their support. The future of these newcomers depends on their ability to fulfil their electoral promises. Both agree on the universal draft, either with military or national civilian service. And they also agree on reducing the benefits for the big ultra-orthodox families who largely depend on state benefits.

Consequences and impact on the political system

Internal issues clearly prevailed over foreign policy in these elections. On the one hand, economic issues such as the elevated cost of living and housing which dominated protests in summer 2011 in the streets of the main Israeli cities, had a place in most electoral programmes. On the other hand, several of the classic demands of more secular Israelis that have gone on to be adopted by many citizens and claimed as political goals by the centrist There is a Future, contributed to its success as well as that (albeit to a lesser degree) of Jewish Home. This parliament will thus be focussed on secular issues, and particularly on the universal draft, which will be the yardstick by which voters measure the success and failure of the different parties. After the Supreme Court ordered the exemptions for *haredim* to be struck down, the government promised to introduce reforms, although it took no specific steps to do so.

Likud - Israel Our Home's electoral debacle – winning with just 31 seats in the elections – leaves Benjamin Netanyahu at Bennett and Lapid's mercy. Although its greatest critics put There is a Future's success down its leader's immense popularity as a TV presenter, it deserves credit for having placed several of the public's long-standing demands at the core of its electoral programme. Chief among these is putting an end to exemptions to military service for *haredim* and forcing citizens of Palestinian descent to carry out an alternative civilian service. Equally important is reducing the welfare benefits the state gives to ultra-Orthodox Israelis and obliging the schools their children attend to respect a general curriculum common to all schools. There is a Future also favours entry to the workforce of ultra-Orthodox men (who usually devote their time to studying the Torah) and women of Palestinian descent – measures that are essential for improving the standard of living of the two sectors of Israeli society that are worst off and which entail the greatest burden on the state.

There is a Future's promises appeal to the key concerns of secular Israelis. Jewish Home's success can be partly attributed to this group also. This is consistent with the party's roots in the one-time National Religious Party and that party's concerns: universal participation in the burdens of the state by completion of military service; a religious but modern way of life; and a school curriculum not limited to the study of sacred texts.

There is a Future and Jewish Home's good results make them the main partners for Benjamin Netanyahu should he want a stable executive. However, because their support would guarantee stability, their leaders will insist on being allowed to decide some of the government's key policies. This means modifying what is known in Israel as the *status quo*, which keeps relations between Judaism and the state practically immovable. This principle, the origins of which lie in a pre-state agreement reached between the Zionist leader David Ben Gurion and the ultra-Orthodox non-Zionist leaders of the British-mandate era Palestine, is trundled out by the ultra-Orthodox every time a government attempts to limit their rights, benefits or freedom of action. As practically every Israeli cabinet has included religious parties, the *status quo* has become increasingly entrenched to the point of becoming seemingly untouchable.

Benjamin Netanyahu could attempt to limit the power of the two parties by including just one of them in his government and completing his cabinet with the centrist The Movement and the religious parties. The latter are conscious of the need to introduce changes to the system of exemptions to the military given the Supreme Court's sentence, but would offer unconditional support to the Likud leader in exchange for minimal reform to military service and minimal secular-style measures. The question arises whether There is a Future would betray its promise of not joining any government unwilling to impose a universal draft, or if it would accept limits to the draft in exchange for seats in the cabinet. It is also unclear whether Bennet will yield to Netanyahu's attempts to silence him, renouncing his goal of becoming the new leader of the right in exchange for a key ministerial portfolio. Lapid and Bennett will need to show their voters concrete achievements if they are to have a political future.

Limiting the power of both men will be the goal of the religious United Torah Judaism and Shas parties, which will forcefully oppose any change to the *status quo*. The former, which is the main list of the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox, has gone from 5 to 7 seats, while the latter, which represents Sephardic believers, revalidated its 11 seats. The left, which all in all has increased its share of seats by 5, hopes that the prediction of elections within a year, made by the Meretz Party leader on election night, will come true. Meanwhile Labour's Shelly Yacimovich will follow through on her promise to lead the opposition to the government in parliament in case of losing the election.

International political reaction

The Israeli elections did not generate significant international reaction. The Obama Administration congratulated Israel the very next day, stating that the United States' unwavering commitment to Israel's security and support for the peace process would remain unchanged, regardless of the makeup of the next government. Five days after the election Obama telephoned Netanyahu to congratulate him and pledged to "work closely with Israel on our shared agenda for peace and security in the Middle East."[8] Just after the elections the Palestinian Authority expressed its willingness to work with "any Israeli government that abides by the United Nations General Assembly resolution that

---

[8] Yediot Aharonot, March 28th 2013

calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital."[9]

Conclusion

Meant to be a ratification of the prime minister and his Likud-Israel Our Home coalition government, the 22 January elections turned out to be a major problem for Netanyahu. Whereas Netanyahu called for a strong government that would allow him to confront a nuclear Iran, voters proved that their concerns are internal – that is to say, issues that affect their daily lives – and that they are willing to give new politicians an opportunity. Namely Yair Lapid, a famous former TV presenter who promises a universal draft, real equality of rights and obligations, and the *haredim* joining the workforce, all to reduce the burden on the state. And Naftali Bennett who, after achieving professional success, seems bent on becoming the new leader of the Israeli right.

Reference to other online analyses of the elections

1. First analysis on the elections published by the Israel Democracy Institute: "The 2013 Knesset Election Results: A Preliminary Analysis of the Upcoming Parliament", Ofer Kenig, January 24th 2013, http://en.idi.org.il/analysis/articles/the-2013-knesset-election-results-a-preliminary-analysis-of-the-upcoming-parliament/

2. Analysis published by World Elections, "Elections 2013", January 26th 2013, http://welections.wordpress.com/2013/01/26/israel-2013/

---

[9] Nabil Abu Rudeineh, presidential spokesman; Palestinian News and Info Agency; January 23th 2013