



Pre-election Analysis

ISRAEL

Israeli elections focused on internal issues

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Date of publication: 19/01/2013

Observatorio Político y Electoral del Mundo Árabe y Musulmán

Taller de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

www.opemam.org

ISSN: being processed

Israeli elections will be held on Tuesday January 22nd. Bearing in mind Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to be re-elected prime minister, all attention is focused on the possible changes to the composition of the parliament and therefore on the new partners in government.

In this process the main news is that Kadima will probably not be able to make it into parliament, despite having been the political party with the most votes in the last two elections. And it won't be the same as in 2009, when Likud instantly recovered all the parliamentary seats it had lost during Ariel Sharon's political adventure three years before. This time, the Labour Party will get back some of the voters who opted for Kadima in 2009 –polls predict about 18 seats-, while many others have settled in the political centre and will vote for Hatnua and Yesh Atid.

Hatnua (The Movement) was founded just before the elections by Tzipi Livni, who left Kadima after losing its primaries. Invited to join other parties, she finally created her own political venture and has tried to improve its social image by offering Amir Peretz, former chairman of the Israeli trade-union Histadrut, to be her number two. Its most direct competitor in the political centre - polls predict 10 seats for each - will be Yesh Atid (There is a Future), created by a former journalist, Yair Lapid, who wanted a party without politicians because "All around the world, when politicians fail they are replaced with new people with new ideas".

These elections could be Labour's way out of a major crisis which resulted in two decades without improving on previous election results, and the party's worst ever outcome in 2009 – 13 seats, the fourth most voted party. Shelly Yacimovich, also a journalist, wants the Labour Party to again become the natural alternative to Likud and is therefore telling voters over and over that the party is now back in the same political centre it once was. In order to get the centre vote she has put the peace process aside, making Meretz and Tzipi Livni's Hatnua the only Jewish parties who still mention the importance of negotiating with the Palestinians. Because Yacimovich wants to convince voters that she is really worried about their problems, she has welcomed into the party three activists from the citizens movement that not long ago went onto the streets to protest against the high cost of living.

In case of losing the elections, Yacimovich says she will lead the opposition instead of entering Netanyahu's cabinet, due to the growing radicalization of Likud and Yisrael Beitenu. In contrast, Yair Lapid would be willing to enter the Government to influence Netanyahu's policy, although he would prefer to sit with another centrist party. Yesh Atid's leader has just one red line: all Israeli citizens must serve in the army; something the religious Shas and United Torah Judaism firmly reject.

Tzipi Livni has a similar position: she accepts being in a Netanyahu government but rejects sitting alongside Haredim and the extreme right. Livni is eager to see the Labour Party, Yesh Atid and her own Hatnua coordinating their entry to the government to force Netanyahu to change his policy. And in case the three centrist parties have more seats than Likud-Yisrael Beitenu, they would ask to have their own prime minister in the second half of the parliamentary term.

This seems to be a much more viable outcome than Yacimovich's dream of being asked by President Shimon Peres to form a government, if the Labour Party gets 25 seats and Likud-Beitenu less than 35. In this scenario she would directly control more seats than Netanyahu, since nearly half of the right-wing coalition's seats would be controlled by Yisrael Beitenu's leader, Avigdor

Lieberman. In order to form a stable government she would need Shas – rejected as a partner by the other centrist parties - or the Arab parties (the polls predict they will again get 11 seats), and this is something as yet unheard of in Israeli politics.

Shas, which gets the vote of the religious and traditional Oriental Jews, has to be present in all governments – no matter who the prime minister is – to get funds for its educational and social programs. It has therefore placed Arie Deri - who supported Rabin in his negotiations with the Palestinians - in its triumvirate political leadership, in case the centre does well in the elections, all the while asking Netanyahu to open coalition talks. This in spite of the fact that Shas is campaigning against Likud's political program. Both parties share the votes of traditional Oriental voters and a good electoral outcome for Shas depends on its ability to get the support of those angry with Netanyahu. Shas is claiming that Likud and Yisrael Beitenu intend not to invite it to join the next government, which will imply tougher economic reforms and an offensive against Jewish traditions such as religious marriage, Orthodox conversions, the draft exemptions for yeshiva students, etc.

Shas' leaders are well aware of how dangerous Naftali Bennet, the growing star of these elections, can be. A former chief of staff in Netanyahu's office and now leader of The Jewish Home, he wants his party – heir to the National Religious Party - to be an alternative to Likud. He argues firmly in favour of a Greater Israel all the while opening the party to secularists and trying to get the votes of the former National Union on the extreme right. Polls predict nearly 15 seats in the forthcoming Parliament for The Jewish Home, which would make it a natural ally of Likud and Yisrael Beitenu. And these parties may need its help, because Netanyahu and Lieberman will bring in less seats together than what they would have obtained if running separately. According to polls they will win between 37 and 33 seats, a number quite far from the nearly 50 they first thought they could achieve together, which would have enabled them to control the government without having to negotiate policies with their partners. In fact, these elections were brought forward because parliament would not pass this year's budget even though Likud and Yisrael Beitenu had 42 seats.