

MERIA

THE NINETEENTH ISRAELI KNESSET ELECTIONS: LACKLUSTER ELECTION, SIGNIFICANT RESULTS

By Jonathan Spyer*

For the first time since the 1970s, there was no serious dispute as to who would emerge as prime minister from the 2013 Israeli elections campaign. Despite the lackluster campaign, the election results and the government that emerged from them do represent a certain change. Most notably, the election campaign focused on internal issues. This is because a core, centrist consensus on external and national security affairs now exists among a critical mass of Israeli Jews. This is also reflected in the new government. The governing coalition consists of the entire center, right and national religious bloc (with the exception of the rump Kadima party, with 2 seats, which has not entered). Labor, the largest opposition party, is centering its criticism of the government on internal, socioeconomic issues, on which it (rightly) perceives the new government to have a fairly united and coherent identity.

The nineteenth Israeli Knesset elections came at the end of a period of relative political stability in Israeli terms. The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, formed in 2009 after a closely contested election, was the first since the mid-1990s to come close to serving out its four year term. Elections became necessary after the government's failure to reach agreement on the budget for the 2013 fiscal year.¹ Political instability had been brewing throughout 2012, however, with early elections narrowly being avoided when the centrist Kadima party briefly joined the government in early 2012. Disputes over the budget led to elections being called for January 2013, some months in advance of when they would in any case have been required.

As the election campaign began, the political map was most noteworthy for the fact that the outcome of the elections was in no serious doubt. For the first time since the days of Labor hegemony in Israel in the 1970s, there was only one plausible candidate for the prime ministership. On this occasion, that candidate was Netanyahu, the incumbent. This circumstance derived not from universal enthusiasm or satisfaction with Netanyahu's performance since 2009. Rather, the

vicissitudes of Israeli politics had produced a situation in which none of the parties with a realistic chance of challenging the Likud were led by an individual deemed to have the necessary qualities and/or experience at that time to present a plausible candidacy for the prime ministership.

This situation emerged because of a variety of circumstances. Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who was widely regarded by the Israeli center and center-left as the individual best placed to unite their forces and present a plausible leadership alternative to Netanyahu, was prevented from re-entering politics because of his legal travails.² Defense Minister Ehud Barak, Former Foreign Minister Tsipi Livni, and former IDF Chief of Staff and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz were the other individuals with a level of experience that might have made them plausible alternative candidates. Yet for varying political reasons, none of these individuals were at the head of a list able to mount a serious challenge to Netanyahu's Likud in 2013.

Barak had effectively terminated his own political career by breaking from the Labor Party in 2010, in order to continue in his role as defense minister. His five-member "Independence" list was not predicted to

achieve even a single seat after the elections (and indeed did not gain a single seat), and Barak announced his intention to retire from politics before the polls. Livni had retired from politics after losing leadership elections to Mofaz in the Kadima party. She then returned as the head of a new party--the Movement (Hatnua). The new party was not predicted to make major gains in the polls, and in the event gained six seats.

Mofaz, heading the remains of Kadima, was heavily disadvantaged by the fact that he had agreed to enter Netanyahu's government in 2012, and had then abruptly withdrawn from it. This compounded a reputation for political indecisiveness, which attached to the Kadima leader. This reputation derived from Mofaz's decision to join Kadima at the time of its foundation, in 2005, shortly after having made a ringing declaration that he would be staying in Likud. While generally considered to have performed adequately in the ministerial positions he had held, Mofaz failed to set out a clear idea of what Kadima stood for in contrast to Likud. As a result, Kadima was plummeting in the polls even prior to the announcement of the election (and received a derisory two seats).

The problems faced by the opposition in offering a credible alternative to Netanyahu were compounded by the presence of two other center-left lists, neither of which fielded a candidate able to pose a credible alternative to Netanyahu as prime minister. Labor, headed by former journalist Shelly Yachimovich, was the only one of the various opposition lists to declare her unwillingness to serve in a government headed by Netanyahu, and by so doing to present herself as an alternative candidate for prime minister. However, Yachimovich, who entered politics only in 2006, lacked any ministerial experience and was not accepted as the natural leader of the center-left by other prominent figures within this camp, still less as a potential prime minister.

An additional list competing for the votes of center-left Israelis was the Yesh Atid party of another journalist-turned-politician, Yair Lapid. Lapid, the son of former justice

minister Yosef "Tommy" Lapid, was a newcomer to the political scene. His party stressed socioeconomic issues and what it perceived as the unfair division of the "burden" in Israeli society between secular and ultra-orthodox Israelis (on such issues as military service, taxation, and housing prices). Lapid's appeal was self-consciously "centrist" rather than leftist, in common with Kadima and Livni's party. Unlike these lists, Lapid focused on internal, rather than national and security questions in his messages.

As a result of this profusion of parties on the center and left, and the absence of a single authoritative leader around whom they could rally, Netanyahu was acknowledged as the near-certain next prime minister.

There were also significant developments on the right-wing side of Israeli politics in the months preceding the elections. Of primary importance was the decision, announced on October 25, 2012, by Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman--leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party--to merge their two parties into a single list for the elections.³ In the eighteenth Knesset (2009-2013), the Likud held 27 seats and Yisrael Beiteinu 15. Due to the split and decline in Kadima, which held the largest number of seats in the outgoing Knesset (28), and other reasons stated above, Likud in any case appeared to have no serious rival as the largest single party.

At the time of writing, the rationale behind the merger of the two lists remains unclear. It was criticized within the Likud almost immediately following the announcement, with one official predicting that it would lead to a decline in the Likud's support. The official quoted suggested that the differing natures of these two parties and their support bases would cancel each other out rather than complement one another.⁴ Both parties regard themselves as part of the nationalist right. Lieberman was a Likud activist for a number of years and first rose to prominence as a member of the party (and as Netanyahu's chief of staff). However, Yisrael Beiteinu's electoral base rested largely on the support of Russian immigrants, while Likud enjoys considerable support from observant and partially observant

Jews, including many of Middle Eastern origin. These are publics with quite different views regarding the place of religion in public life.

In a significant development in another part of right-of-center Israeli politics, businessman and former Special Forces officer Naphtali Bennett defeated veteran politician Zevulun Orlev on November 6, 2012, in leadership primaries in the Bayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home) party. Bayit Hayehudi was formed from a 2008 union between the National Religious Party--the party of Israel's national religious sector--and two radical right parties, Moledet and Tkuma. Moledet subsequently left the new list and stood with the rightist National Union list in the 2009 elections. Bayit Hayehudi achieved only three seats in these elections.⁵

The election of Bennett led to renewed interest in the party. Bennett, 40, was a former chief of staff to Netanyahu, and a prominent activist on behalf of Jewish communities in the West Bank and against the settlement freeze ordered by the Israeli government in 2010. The National Religious Party had declined in strength in recent years, as a result of a number of leaders who had failed to secure the loyalty of the growing, influential national religious sector of the Israeli public. Bennett's election was widely predicted as likely to halt and reverse this trend, because of his potential appeal to non-religious voters on the right-wing side of the spectrum.

Subsequent to Bennett's victory, the further-right National Union split. Veteran settlement activist Uri Ariel then brought his Tkuma list over to Bayit Hayehudi, further strengthening the prospects of Bayit Hayehudi in the upcoming elections. The remaining components of the National Union, Hatikva, and Eretz Yisrael Shelanu then formed the Otzma l'Yisrael list for the 2013 elections.⁶

In the Arab and ultra-orthodox sectors, no major changes preceded the 2013 elections. Three major parties continued to compete for the votes of Arab citizens of Israel. These were: Hadash, the list of the Israeli communist party; Balad, a secular Arab nationalist list; and Ram-Ta'al, a list that brought together the

party of Dr. Ahmad Tibi--a well-known activist for Israel's Arabs and former adviser to PLO leader Yasir Arafat--with the United Arab List, a party dominated by members of the southern branch of Israel's Islamic Movement.

Among the ultra-orthodox, the Ashkenazi United Torah Judaism (UTJ) and the Sephardi Shas party were the two significant lists. UTJ brings together the Hassidic Agudat Yisrael and the Degel Hatorah party, which represents ultra-orthodox Jews of the non-Hassidic Lithuanian tradition. Shas, whose support base is mainly among disadvantaged Israeli Jews of North African origin, brought back former leader Aryeh Deri, who had served a prison term for corruption. Deri was not brought back as the undisputed leader of the party. Rather, he was part of a leadership triumvirate which also included former leader Eli Yishai and Rabbi Ariel Attias.⁷

Two smaller Haredi parties also stood in the elections. These were Netzah--a split from the Degel Hatorah party--and Am Shalem--led by Rabbi Chaim Amsalem. The latter advocated a more liberal approach to conversion issues, the integration of greater numbers of Haredi Jews into the labor force in Israel, and a more liberal attitude regarding women's rights. Amsalem was a former Shas member of the Knesset who had clashed with the party's leadership over his more liberal attitude, split from the party, and then established the new list, which was a play on his name.⁸

In addition, as is usual in elections in Israel, a variety of exotic additional parties with no realistic chance of gaining a seat also ran. Among these were the Ale Yarok party (Green Leaf), which supports the legalization of marijuana; a party seeking to represent the interests of Israeli pensioners; two additional leftist parties--the Da'am Workers' Party and Eretz Chadasha (New Land); and a variety of others. The low cost of registering a party in Israel and the provision of TV time for the propaganda of all registered parties create the incentive for registering one-issue and fringe lists of this type. Occasionally, such parties

do surprisingly well (for example, the Pensioners' Party in the 2006 elections).

THE CAMPAIGN

The beginning of the election campaign coincided with Israel's conducting of a military operation against the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, in response to rocket fire from this area. Operation Pillar of Defense consisted of air strikes on selected targets in Gaza. Despite the fact that the operation saw both Tel Aviv and the Jerusalem area targeted by missiles from Gaza, the absence of an IDF ground operation and the very low number of Israeli casualties meant that following the conclusion of a ceasefire, the operation did not loom large in the election campaign.

Likud party primaries took place on November 27, 2012, and resulted in a younger and more solidly rightist list. A number of prominent party figures--including Benny Begin, Dan Meridor, and Michael Eitan found themselves excluded from realistic positions. The radical rightist Moshe Feiglin, meanwhile, was placed at number 15 in the list. Other younger Likud members associated with the more "ideological" side of the party, such as Danny Danon, Miri Regev, Ze'ev Elkin, and Tzipi Hotovely also placed in the top 20.⁹

From its commencement, the campaign was characterized by a relatively low level of public interest. This was attributable to the fact that the results appeared a foregone conclusion--namely, that Likud Beiteinu would emerge as the single largest party and would go on to form the next government. This fact even seemed to have been acknowledged by the main opposition parties--with the notable exception of Labor, whose leader consistently declared that she was competing for the prime ministership and that Labor would not sit in a government headed by Netanyahu.

Following the conclusion of Likud party primaries in late November 2012, opinion polls appeared to indicate that Likud Beiteinu would win a comfortable victory. A poll by the Dialog agency conducted for *Haaretz* newspaper on November 28, 2012, had the

party winning 39 seats, if elections were held at that time.¹⁰ A poll taken by the New Wave agency for *Yisrael Hayom* put the party at the same number,¹¹ with two other polls suggesting that Likud Beiteinu would win 37 seats. The *Haaretz* and *Yisrael Hayom* polls both had Labor second, with 18 and 20 respectively.¹²

As the campaign began in earnest, however, it became apparent from the polls that Likud Beiteinu was losing altitude and would almost certainly not score as a single list anywhere near the number of seats its component parts controlled as separate parties. Polls throughout December 2012 and January 2013 witnessed a steady, gradual decline of projected support for the party. As Likud Beiteinu's standing in the polls continued to decline, much media focus centered on the rising popularity of the Bayit Hayehudi party, led by Naftali Bennett. Not only in Israel itself, but also nationally, the expected gains of this list and their implications for Israel were much discussed.

Some pundits depicted the rise of Bennett as a surge for the radical right and a potential threat to Israeli democracy. Such conclusions derived from a superficial acquaintance with Israeli politics. Bennett had indeed achieved a significant feat in the period prior to the election, by establishing his list as the only serious option for right-wing Israelis from the national religious community. He also benefitted from the union between Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu. An element of both traditional Likud and also former Yisrael Beiteinu voters were likely to be attracted to Bennett's party--the former because they disliked the secular orientation of Yisrael Beiteinu, with which Likud was now aligned; the latter because they had sought in Yisrael Beiteinu a more hardline nationalist party than Likud. The union between the two meant they had to search anew--and Bennett was the only serious competitor on the hard right, with only the tiny and fringe Otzma le Yisrael list further right.

Yet for all this, the polls never at any stage indicated a result other than electoral victory for Likud Beiteinu. Polls taken in the final

days before the election predicted that the party would win 31 seats.¹³ This was far lower than the two parties had hoped for at the time of their merger. It appeared to indicate that the merger had been a costly error. Yet the list was still 12 seats ahead of the next biggest list.

Still, it was the identity of the second biggest list, according to the final polls, which constituted the biggest surprise of the 2013 election. In a poll taken on January 17, 2013, five days before the scheduled election, Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid list was predicted to win only eight seats.¹⁴ However, in polls taken on the eve of the vote, the party's projected support had surged and stood at 19 seats.¹⁵ According to the final polls, Yesh Atid was predicted to eclipse Labor as the second largest party.

THE RESULTS

Voting took place on January 22, 2013. There had been predictions of a low turn-out because of a general awareness of the inevitability that Likud-Beiteinu would be the largest list. However, these predictions were not realized. Turnout stood at 67.78 percent of all registered voters.¹⁶ This was in line with previous Israeli experience and is high in relation to other democracies.

In line with the final polls, Likud Beiteinu emerged as the largest party, though its total of 31 seats was surely far lower than the two components of the list had hoped for. It represented a decline of 11 seats from the party's combined strength of 42 seats prior to the election. The surprise of the elections was the very strong performance of Yesh Atid, which won 19 seats, emerging as the second largest party.

Naftali Bennett's Jewish Home party scored 12 seats. This represented an increase of three--an achievement, but far less than the triumph some media coverage had suggested for Bennett. Labor was pushed into third place, winning 15 seats. This was less than the party had hoped for, and was seen as a failure, though not a disaster, for the strategy followed by party leader Shelly Yachimovich. Kadima, the largest party in the twelfth Knesset, was

decimated, declining from 28 seats to only 2. The new Hatnua list of former foreign minister Tsipi Livni achieved a modest success, with six seats.

In the Arab sector, there was no change, with all three parties--Balad, Chadash, and the United Arab List winning the exact same number of seats as in the previous Knesset. In the Jewish ultra-orthodox sector, meanwhile, Shas and United Torah Judaism slightly increased their Knesset representation. Shas won 11 seats, one up on their previous tally, and UTJ enjoyed an increase of two, going from 5 to 7 seats. The left-wing Meretz also enjoyed a modest increase in support, going from 3 to 6 seats. Far-left and far-right lists failed to enter the Knesset.¹⁷

The results thus brought no major surprises, other than the late surge of support for Lapid's list. Yet while Lapid's rise was undoubtedly impressive, it is also the case that the phenomenon of new centrist lists enjoying dazzling initial success--and then falling as fast as they rose--is one that is well known to Israeli politics. There are many examples of such lists. The first was Yigael Yadin's Democratic List for Change in the 1977 elections. There have been others, up to and including Kadima. A characteristic of such lists is that they tend to fail to establish themselves as permanent presences in the political scene. So the arrival of Lapid may be seen as the system behaving normally, rather than a truly new occurrence.

COALITION NEGOTIATIONS AND GOVERNMENT FORMATION

From the outset, it was clear that only Netanyahu was in a position to form a government, and he was duly allocated a four-week period by President Shimon Peres to assemble a coalition. The coalition negotiations proved complex and drawn-out. A central reason for this was the understanding on the part of both Lapid and Bennett that in order to ensure their own political futures, they would need to avoid being seen to have reneged on election promises. This meant that both parties would

negotiate hard on issues of principle. Lapid had said that he would refuse to sit in a government with ultra-orthodox parties. He stuck to this declaration, knowing that with 19 seats, he could drive a hard bargain.

In terms of the Knesset arithmetic, Netanyahu could conceivably have achieved a bare Knesset majority with a coalition consisting of Likud-Beiteinu, Jewish Home, Shas, and United Torah Judaism. Such a coalition would have left the prime minister at the leftward edge of a very narrow coalition, and thus extremely vulnerable to the demands of his coalition partners. However, this possibility strengthened the prime minister's hand in the negotiations with Yesh Atid and Bayit Hayehudi.

The negotiations lasted 40 days.¹⁸ They were most notable for the partnership that emerged between Bennett and Lapid, and for the demands of Lapid, which were the main cause of the drawn out process. A consensus was reached on the issue of the budget, and a plan for the progressive removal of draft exemptions for all but a limited number of ultra-orthodox Israelis and other reforms aimed at reducing subsidies to this group in the population were agreed upon.

The negotiations then continued with wrangling over the division of cabinet posts. Lapid initially insisted on the foreign affairs portfolio for himself. The prime minister insisted on holding this position for Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman. Lapid eventually agreed to accept the finance ministry.

Lapid's additional demands for the interior and education ministries and the chairmanship of the Knesset finance committee then caused the talks to drag out further. A compromise formula produced by Bennett finally ended the stalemate, producing the agreement by which the government was formed. According to the agreement, Lapid's party would receive the education portfolio, but concede demands for the interior ministry and finance committee chairmanship.

The final cabinet assembled was smaller than its predecessor – containing only 21 ministers.¹⁹ As to whether the new

government will succeed in governing effectively or for long, neither is certain. Relations between Netanyahu and Bennett remain strained, dating back apparently to Bennett's time as an official in Netanyahu's bureau. The prime minister also does not enjoy close working relations with either Lapid or Tsipi Livni, his other coalition partners.

In addition, there is some anger in the Likud. Netanyahu managed to ensure a majority for Likud Beiteinu ministers in the cabinet. Yet the party's poor performance in the elections is related by many activists to the decision to bring Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu into a single list. The joint list is now not expected to lead to a permanent fusion of the two parties. Likud by itself now has only 20 seats--one more than Yesh Atid. Netanyahu is seen as responsible for this situation. It is likely that he will face a serious challenge to his leadership within the next four years. There are also substantive differences on policy between the various coalition partners--for example, on the peace process with the Palestinians, Bennett's views differ widely from those of Tsipi Livni. Both personal tensions and policy differences may thus have their effect on the longevity of the new coalition.

CONCLUSION

The 2013 elections in Israel had been expected to produce few surprises. Yet observation of the coalition they produced indicates that despite the lackluster campaign, the election results and the government that emerged from them do represent a change--the most significant elements being the rise of Yair Lapid and the consequent exclusion of the ultra-orthodox parties from the government. Lapid's rise was hailed in some quarters as representing a genuinely new development. However, as noted above, Israeli centrist parties have made major gains in the past. Yet almost all of these parties were centrally concerned with external issues and the diplomatic process. Lapid, by contrast, is centrally concerned with domestic affairs.

There is one party in recent Israeli political history that ran on a similar (in fact, almost identical) orientation to that of Lapid. This was the Shinui party, when it was led by none other than Lapid's father, the late Yosef "Tommy" Lapid. The elder Lapid, also a journalist, won 15 seats as head of Shinui in the 2003 elections.²⁰ Shinui's platform was in all essentials identical to that of Yesh Atid--supporting a secular, centrist outlook and with a particular focus on reducing benefits to ultra-orthodox communities. The elder Lapid had a more confrontational style than his son, but the content was much the same. The elder Lapid's party all but disappeared in the 2006 elections, following the foundation of the centrist Kadima (which itself all but disappeared in the 2013 elections, losing many votes--to the party of the younger Lapid). So Lapid's orientation and his success are not without precedent.

Still, it is undoubtedly the case that internal social and economic issues have acquired greater centrality in Israeli elections and political discussion in recent years. In this regard, Shelly Yachimovich's leadership of the Labor Party in the 2013 elections provided an additional example of this. The growing consensus in Israel on matters of national security appears to be clearing space for divisions to emerge on internal issues. This was notable in Yachimovich's first speech to the Knesset following the swearing in of the new government, in which she focused on what she saw as the nature of the new government as representing the privileged sections of society. Whatever one thinks of the merits of this description, it is noteworthy that this element formed the basis of the Labor leader's critique. Indeed, following the nineteenth Knesset elections, one might even discern a certain ideological or at least sectoral coherence to both the government and the opposition blocs, which was previously absent.

The governing coalition consists of the entire center, right and national religious bloc (with the exception of the rump Kadima party, with 2 seats, which has not entered). The opposition consists of the left, the Arab

parties, and the ultra-orthodox. Since a broad consensus on national security issues stretching from the center right to the center left pertains, fractiousness in the next Knesset is likely to focus on domestic issues. This is not to say, of course, that issues of profound importance in the national security sphere do not still exist. Iran, Syria, the rise of Sunni Islamism to power, the future of the West Bank and Gaza all present enormous challenges. However, the new Israeli government is likely to experience less vociferous internal opposition to its positions on these issues, than on domestic matters.

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