



Who Said Democracy is Always a Good Thing?

Joel Meyer

I've been meaning to write an article about the Israeli elections for over a week now. The truth is that I have been immensely busy and haven't found the time to put pen to paper, but had I found time, I'm not so sure that I would have been able to know what to write anyway. Even now, eleven days on, I'm still thoroughly confused about the whole thing...and I'm not the only one.

The centrist Kadima party led by Tzipi Livni garnered 28 of the Knesset's 120 seats making it the largest party, closely followed by Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party with 27 seats. However narrow the margin of Kadima's victory in the polls, a victory it was, surely giving Livni the right to try and form a governmental coalition...

However, although Livni's Kadima may be the largest party, the Israeli populace as a whole took a rather dramatic shift to the right this election, giving Netanyahu's Likud party perhaps the best chance of forming a governable coalition. A glance at the results shows the possibility of a Likud-led 65 seat coalition of exclusively right-of-centre parties, without Kadima, the largest party, and without Ehud Barak's left-of-centre Avoda – Israel's once largest party, now relegated to a disastrous fourth place in the polls.

Finally yesterday, Israel's president, former Avoda stalwart Shimon Peres, elected to award Netanyahu of Likud the opportunity of forming a government, and not Livni, whose party actually won the election! Confused? You should be!

Now the real fun begins, with all kinds of political maneuvering set to take place on the way to deciding which parties will sit inside the coalition and which will take their places in opposition. In addition, much discussion, debate and argument will take place regarding which politicians from which parties will be given which government ministries.

Such political maneuvering, the bartering and offering of positions, is standard practice in Israeli politics. It is an oft heard complaint that the nature of Israel's political system dictates that the party charged with forming the coalition tends to cede control over important ministries to certain other parties in order to secure their



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entry into the coalition. The complainants argue that these parties, often smaller, representing specific groups within Israeli society, thus wield a disproportionate influence in comparison to the number of votes that they received. The secular criticism of the oriental religious Shas party's control over the education ministry and the Ultra Orthodox control over the religious ministry are classic examples of this critique.

This political bed-hopping takes on added significance right now for a number of reasons: Netanyahu favors a unity government with both Kadima from the centre and Yisrael Beitenu from the right joining Likud in what would certainly be a more stable government. However, Livni as it stands seems set to reject this arrangement in favor of leading her party into a period of opposition rather than joining forces with Yisrael Beitenu and being part of a broad-based coalition that she terms as having 'a lack of political vision.' This would leave Netanyahu with only the option of forming a right-wing coalition. This would be problematic for a number of reasons, not least because of the lack of credibility that such a government would have in the international community and perhaps most crucially the United States, where President Obama appears intent on advancing the peace process and the idea of a two-state solution.

Right-wing governments are nothing new for Israel, being part of the political scene since Begin's Likud-led government took power in 1977. Incidentally, after nearly thirty years of uninterrupted rule for the left, it was Begin that oversaw the signing of Israel's first full peace agreement with one of its neighbors – Egypt.

What would make this one different would be the presence of Yisrael Beitenu led by Avigdor Lieberman. Yisrael Beitenu is a right-wing secular party, whose chairman Lieberman has espoused some very extreme views on Israel's Arab citizens including the idea of population transfer and stripping citizenship from those deemed disloyal to the state. In addition, Lieberman is in the midst of a criminal corruption investigation. That Lieberman's party is the third largest in Israel and seems certain to form a key part of any coalition is viewed as highly problematic by many within Israel as well as by those outside the country, who fear that such a change in direction will lead the Middle East further and further away from any prospect of peace.

Yet many suggest that it is precisely the despair in Israeli society – that no prospect for peace currently exists to be moved away from; a feeling that there is no other side



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to negotiate with, exacerbated by the recent action in Gaza and the continued rhetoric of Hamas, that has led to the rise of a party promoting a more radical agenda.

Nearly two weeks after the elections, a new government has yet to be sworn in, and when it is, it is all but sure to be significantly to the right of the political spectrum. In the meantime, Kadima's Ehud Olmert, chastised over his conduct in the Second Lebanon War of 2006 and his failure to secure the release of the captured soldier Gilad Shalit and mired in his own corruption scandal, continues on as acting Prime Minister. Ironically, in the coming weeks, many in the centre and on the moderate left are likely to wish that Olmert's premiership, which they had previously been so intent upon seeing come to an end, had been allowed to continue after all.

Those in the centre and on the left who wanted Olmert out at any cost are now faced with a perhaps altogether bleaker prospect: four years of Lieberman and Netanyahu.

You don't know what you've got till it's gone... be careful what you wish for because it might just come true...

What will happen next is anyone's guess...

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