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THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS: THE CAMPAIGN BEGINS

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Small party power. Stalemated issues. Major parties — a new harmony. Small parties — intensified competition. An earnest and responsible campaign.

On May 31st, twenty-seven political parties officially submitted lists of candidates to be on the ballot for the July 23d Israeli Knesset elections. In the eyes of many observers of the Israeli political scene, it will be the wrong election, at the wrong time, for the wrong reasons. Paradoxically, this perception has surfaced not because of the multiplicity of parties or because of some deficiency in Israel's democratic process, but because of the emergence of something akin to two party competition as it is known in the United States and other English-speaking democracies.

SMALL PARTY POWER

It is generally agreed among those who know the Israeli scene that, no matter who wins the election, the contest between the Likud and Labor parties is a contest among virtual equals. Each of the two parties is likely to gain between forty-five and fifty seats in the 120 member Knesset, with neither likely to exceed fifty-five or drop below forty-two. All the signs — including the experience of the 1981 elections — point to the likelihood that the smaller parties together will not win more than 20 percent of the vote and may even fall below 15 percent. Under Israel's proportional representation system, whatever they win is then reflected almost exactly in the distribution of Knesset seats, enough to prevent any single party from winning a majority.

This leads to a second paradox: despite the decline in the statistical weight of the small parties, individually and collectively their political weight is increasing proportionately (some say disproportionately) because of

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the close balance between the two major parties. No one expects either one of the two to gain a Knesset majority, even if there were to be a landslide in one direction or the other. Hence, the small parties will hold the balance of power, even more than in the past. It is widely feared that they will not hesitate to use their strategic position to hold up either of the big parties for ransom in order to form a government, which, in any case, will have no more than a bare majority.

Nor is every one of the small parties free to enter a coalition with either of the larger two. Indeed, one worst case scenario much feared by Labor Party supporters is that, given the prior commitments of the smaller parties, unless Labor wins at least fifty-five seats, it will not have enough potential coalition partners to form a government, while Likud would be able to do so with a much smaller number, and thus may return to power even if it comes in second in the vote.

STALEMATED ISSUES

It is because of this situation that many observers feel that an election at this time will not bring any real change, no matter who wins, that the country was propelled into early elections without sufficient reason, and that nobody is likely to emerge a real winner. All this is compounded by the fact that, while the issues confronting Israel are clear enough, in the present situation they do not lend themselves to an election contest between the two major parties.

Take Lebanon for example. According to the latest polls, somewhere around 55 percent of the Israeli public still believes that the Israeli government was right in going into Lebanon, which means that a Labor Party attack on that issue can do no more than strengthen its hold on voters already committed to it. On the other hand, a very large majority would like to get out of Lebanon but almost everyone perceives that Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Defense Minister Moshe Arens would like to get out of Lebanon no less than Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin, their opposite numbers. So too, Peres and Rabin are as sensitive as Shamir and Arens to the difficulties involved in any precipitous withdrawal. So the issue, for the moment at any rate, is a stand-off.

The same is true with regard to the Palestinians and the territories, only more so. While there may be sharper differences between Likud and Labor over that issue, those differences have diminished to the extent that a very substantial percentage of the Labor Party has come to the conclusion that, even if a redivision of the territory were to become acceptable to the Arabs, it is now impossible because of the settlement activity which took place under the Likud government. Even more are convinced that, in any case, there are no Arab partners forthcoming, nor would there be any who would be willing to accept even Labor's minimum non-negotiable position demanding all of Jerusalem and defensible borders. So the issue is, at least momentarily, moot.

A more burning issue on the Israeli scene is the relationship between religion, state, and society. The vast majority in both parties rejects Orthodox extremism but, by the same token, a large majority in each also rejects efforts on the part of militant secularists to change the status quo. Whereas Menachem Begin was more sympathetic to some of the legislative demands of the ultra-Orthodox, Shamir is no more receptive to them than Peres, and Shamir is closer to the mainstream Likud position on this issue than Begin ever was. On the other hand, the effort on the part of the Mayor of Petah Tikvah, a Labor Party man, to openly alter the legislated status quo regarding sabbath entertainment (as distinct from allowing changes to

take place informally) was more or less repudiated by the Labor Party leadership, who were not at all happy with being drawn into a conflict with even the moderate Orthodox at election time. The Petah Tikvah incident came at a time when Labor had begun to build goodwill in the Orthodox camp, in the hope of enticing the National Religious Party into a coalition with them after July 23d. So both sides would like to avoid confrontation on this issue if they could.

This leaves the economy and runaway inflation by far the major issue confronting Israel today. Yet, curiously enough, it too is problematic as an election issue. While the long-term structural consequences of inflation approaching if not exceeding 400 percent annually are serious, the system of wage and payment indexing which prevails in Israel has taken much of the sting out for individual citizens.

For a moment in October 1983, following the bank crisis and as the inflation rate zoomed upward, people began to panic but, by January, most discovered that they could live with this kind of inflation too -- at least in the short run -- and began relaxing -- and spending -- again. It is hard for Labor to raise the issue of the impoverishment of the Israeli citizen as a result of runaway inflation at a time when the real worry of many politicians is whether so many people will be out of the country on election day, traveling for pleasure in Europe, the United States or any place else in the world, that it will make a difference in the electoral results. Moreover, Labor does not have an attractive candidate for finance minister to take the lead in presenting this issue to the Israeli public. Gad Yaakovi, who would like this position and appears to be the front runner, does not particularly attract Israeli voters. Ex-general Mordechai Gur, who has been suggested as a possible alternative, has no special expertise in economics. Peres, like Shamir and other contenders for the premiership in Israel's history, has generally stayed away from economic issues and has demonstrated little understanding of them.

In the end, the Labor Party is left with having to make an issue out of a general feeling that the Likud has made a mess of things, while the Likud is left with having to make an issue out of the general feeling that Labor still has not cleaned up its act. Both of these issues have a basis in reality, but neither is likely to shift many voters from their earlier predispositions. Thus, the polls show that the gap between Labor and Likud is narrowing. A third of the voters still remain undecided, most of whom voted Likud in 1981. I would hazard a guess that, given half a chance, they will vote Likud again. But, if Likud fails to make a sufficient case for doing so, at least some of them will defect to Labor, enough to give Labor the edge.

All this is not to say that as the campaign progresses, the parties will not find issues upon which to focus. In the normal course of things, issues will develop, but, contrary to the expectations of many who devoutly wished for early elections, the real issues are not likely to be on center stage.

MAJOR PARTIES -- A NEW HARMONY

What has been notable to date is the way in which the major parties have achieved internal harmony in preparation for the campaign. Their success has been notable, especially considering what seemed to be the serious internal divisions which prevailed in both up to the eve of the campaign. In essence, the leadership and activists of both parties realized that in the kind of two party contest which Knesset elections have become, neither major party can afford serious internal conflict and every faction in each party has to reconcile itself to being part of a broad coalition playing pragmatic politics rather than a party with a clear ideological stance.

Thus, not only did Herut bridge the differences between Shamir and Deputy Prime Minister David Levy, but they even found a way to simultaneously show Ariel Sharon the limits of his power and yet place him in a sufficiently important position on the party list to reflect his popularity in certain quarters. Even more impressive is the way in which Herut and the Liberal Party maintained their alliance despite the major efforts on the part of segments of both parties to end it.

The triumph of party harmony was even more noticeable within the Labor Party. Peres and Rabin stopped fighting each other to join forces to neutralize Yitzhak Navon who, realizing that the calling of early elections did not allow him time to organize a real campaign for the leadership, accepted a position as one of the Party's "gang of four" (the fourth is campaign chairman Chaim Bar Lev) who now share the party leadership.

Here, too, we confront a paradox. While the party activists in both Likud and Labor are feeling good about their success in preserving unity and harmony, the rank and file voters are more than somewhat disenchanted by the way in which unity and harmony were achieved: in the case of the Likud, with the spectacle of the Liberals, who count for little or nothing at the polls, maneuvering to save their own skins; and in the case of Labor, with the fact that the "gang of four" chose who would be on the list and in what position, rather than organizing the list through a more open democratic process.

SMALL PARTIES -- INTENSIFIED COMPETITION

By contrast, most of the smaller parties have suffered internal disruption, in some cases leading to actual breakups and in others to wounds which may have been papered over at the last minute but certainly are not likely to heal soon. It seems that, as the chances for the smaller parties decline, the fight for seats naturally intensifies. Each party has fewer potentially safe seats to allocate. This, in turn, encourages factions to break away so that their leaders can be numbers one and two on their own lists rather than numbers five and six on some joint list that is likely to receive only three mandates.

There has also been a whole crop of new lists -- it would be hard to refer to them as parties -- which have sprung up, some of which never even made it to the stage of formally getting on the ballot. The most visible of these has been Ezer Weitzman's Yahad (Together) Party. It has also been the most disappointing. Starting with great fanfare, Weitzman attempted to present himself not only as the fair-haired boy of Israeli politics, but as the potential leader of a redemption ticket. In the end, he had a hard time finding people of stature to run with him. Yahad's list, as it was submitted, while containing solid citizens, virtually lacks any distinction and is not likely to build voter confidence as more than a vehicle to put Weitzman back in the Knesset and in a position to bargain with one of the major parties when it comes time to form a government. The best assessment today is that Yahad will win no more than two or three seats in July.

AN EARNEST AND RESPONSIBLE CAMPAIGN

Now the campaign will begin in earnest. There has already been much talk of the need to make it a more civil campaign than that of 1981, which had a high level of verbal violence and occasionally more. The parties have pledged to work hard to contain any such tendencies this time around. At the present

moment, the worst antagonisms are within some of the smaller parties rather than between the larger ones, so that there is some hope that this pledge will indeed be fulfilled.

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