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PRIMARIES HAVE COME TO ISRAEL

Daniel J. Elazar

The Continued "Americanization" of Israeli Politics / The Parties and the Primaries / Labor and Likud: Special Challenges of Conciliating Interests and Factions / The Maturity of the Voters' Response / More Extreme Yet More Pragmatic

The Continued "Americanization" of Israeli Politics

Israel continues its shift from European to American-style politics this year with the introduction of the direct election of the prime minister. For the first time, on May 29 of this year, the Israeli voter will cast two separate votes, one for the head of the government and the other for a Knesset list. In addition, all the major parties adopted and implemented some system of primary elections to select their candidates for the Knesset. Israelis see this as another form of Americanization, either for good or for ill, depending on their perspective. Indeed, although there is a Hebrew term for primaries, "*bichriot mukdamot*," the term that is universally used is "*primaries*."

This year's primaries were all concentrated in a single week, between March 24 and 28. The Labor and Likud primaries were held back-to-back on March 25 and 26, with Meretz the day before. Thus, while the format of each party's primaries was different, there was a kind of "American" atmosphere for the country as a whole with two

successive days of action, hoopla, and maximum coverage by the mass media. Indeed, the event was shaped by the mass media who built it up into an American-style show with all the hoopla involved. The parties, of course, realizing that the media wanted a show, did their utmost to attract media attention and therefore encouraged full exploitation of the event, including pre-primary meetings with 12,000 balloons let loose (Likud), grand entrances by the party heads at exactly the right prime-time moment (both), and exit polls to give the listening audience a preview of the results (which failed miserably, principally because of the deals between interest groups and candidates. The results, however, reminded Americans of the 1948 polling debacle at the time of the Truman election.)

The Parties and the Primaries

In fact, there is no state law requiring primaries. In every case, the fact and the form of the primaries was a matter for each party to decide on its own, but once one party went in that direction, the others could hardly avoid doing the same in a

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor. 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax. 02-619112, Internet: elazar@vms.huji.ac.il. In U.S.A.: 1616 Walnut St., Suite 513, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5308; Tel. (215) 204-1459, Fax. (215) 204-7784. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.

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populist age. Labor chose its candidates through primaries in 1992 and Likud did not but had a complicated arrangement involving the Likud Central Committee. That arrangement, which in itself was not unfair, created a lot of bad blood within the party when the Shamir majority faction pushed David Levy's faction out of the first rank, and led to aggressive media and public attacks on its "undemocratic" character. The Likud got the hint and this time tried to produce an even more up-to-date primary system than Labor. That principally took the form of using computers rather than hand ballots for the actual voting, recording, and counting of the vote.

All told, three parties held actual primaries. Those that did not included Tzomet (Rafael Eitan), Gesher (David Levy), and the National Religious Party (NRP), all medium-size parties, as well as the small ones.

Labor and Likud: Special Challenges of Conciliating Interests and Factions

The primaries of the two large parties represented a mixture of a single countrywide list and regional or district lists. Candidates for nomination could choose whether they wished to run on the countrywide list or in their region. Since the general election is still entirely based on a proportional list system, each party has to designate beforehand the ordering of its list so it is possible to know who will be elected depending on the proportion of the vote the party receives. This means that it also must designate which positions on the party list are reserved for what districts before the primaries. In other words, in one of the two large parties, ten people might be competing for one seat from District X and the one who won would then be slotted in the 25th position on the general party list which was considered to be a "safe" seat. On the basis of past experience, it is assumed that both Labor and Likud will receive somewhere between 40 and 45 seats, so that anyone on the list in a position in the first 40 or perhaps even the first 42 is considered to be a shoe-in. The next three to five seats are considered chancy, and below that, very unlikely to produce winners.

In the past, the parties had earmarked safe seats for special constituencies: in Labor, the kibbutzim, the moshavim, the Histadrut, the Arabs and Druse, and more recently women; in the Likud, for the various components of the party (e.g., Herut, Liberals, La'am), the factions within it (e.g., the Levy bloc, the Sharon bloc), and for a Druse.

The idea behind the primaries was, in part, to end this allocation of safe seats to special interests, but in

practice it has not worked that way. After eliminating the old special interests, both parties had ended up introducing the reservation of seats for new ones or sometimes the old ones in new guise. For example, Arabs and Druse have lost their preferential treatment (although Labor actually nominated four, including a very dynamic Christian Arab woman from Jaffa), but safe seats have been reserved for women in both parties. While seats are no longer "reserved" for kibbutzim in Labor, the party has formed a separate "district" for Labor kibbutzim similar to the territorial districts. While Labor hoped to have an olim from the former Soviet Union on the ticket as the "representative" of the olim from the FSU, the person elected for the seat reserved for new olim was the leader of the Ethiopian political community. Labor was thrown into confusion. While happy to accept the Ethiopian nominee, they realized that this was a real problem for them in front of the 600,000 olim from the FSU.

At an emergency meeting of a special committee appointed for the occasion of the most senior party leaders the following week, it was decided that there would be a special primary election at the Labor party convention in which the 17,000 party members who qualified as new olim from the FSU would be allowed to vote to choose a nominee who would then be placed on the list one position ahead of the Ethiopian victor. This immediately provoked considerable anger within the party, not only on the part of the Ethiopians, but on the part of those who would be lowered one position so that number 42 would lose his safe seat. Since number 42 happened to be Shimon Shitreet, the present Minister of Religions, who had made himself quite unpopular in the party but who nevertheless brings a certain constituency with him, this is problematic.

What Labor hoped for and ultimately got was that Ora Namir, the present Minister of Labor and Social Welfare who also has lost considerable popularity in the party and who came in much lower in the primaries than Dalia Itzik, a Peres-supported candidate, would resign her candidacy so that nobody else would have to be moved to insert the FSU representative. She was promptly appointed ambassador to China for doing so. (Prior to the 1992 elections, Namir ran for Labor party leader as a separate candidate and by doing so assisted Rabin to his victory over Peres, who was then leader of the largest party faction.)

The Likud has had an even more difficult problem. In an effort to form a united front in the national camp for the prime ministerial elections, it has had to make far-reaching concessions to two smaller break-away

parties: Tzomet, headed by former chief-of-staff Rafael Eitan, and Gesher, headed by former Likud minister David Levy. (Let me remind the reader that the parties in Israel are clearly grouped into three "camps," originally the labor, civil, and religious camps. The religious camp remains the same; the civil camp has become known as the national camp when its dominant party ceased to be the General Zionist/Liberal party and became Herut — the two later merged to become Likud with Herut as the senior partner; and the Labor camp, retaining the same name for popular usage, really has become something else. But while their contents have changed, the camps remain as strong as ever when it comes to grouping, combining, and dividing the parties.)

Levy, embarrassed and angered by his experience in the previous elections when Shamir's people froze his people out of the leading positions on the list, broke away this year and established a new party with his followers, presumably to advance social issues but actually to ensure that, one way or another, he and his leading colleagues would be in the next government.

Tzomet in the 1992 elections became the highly successful party of the yuppie right wing, that is to say, those successful younger Israelis who are analogous to suburbanites in other countries, interested in the environment, personal achievement, private enterprise, and fiscal conservatism on the part of government, and were similar to Meretz in that respect but who rejected Meretz's peace platform and support the security platform of the national camp. During the last four years Tzomet broke into pieces because of Eitan's dictatorial style and the fact that he had picked people who had more personal political ambition than commitment to his "movement."

This time Binyamin Netanyahu, the Likud party head, brought Tzomet into the Likud for the elections, promising it seven reserved seats. Naturally, Levy demanded the same for Gesher to establish a similar link and Netanyahu was forced to concede that to them. So, out of the 42 seats deemed safe to the Likud, one-third had to be given away before the polls even opened on primary day. This meant that at the end of the day a substantial number of veteran Likud politicians were left out of the "safe" 42 including such veterans as Dov Shilansky, the former Likud Speaker of the Knesset, and Geula Cohen (trying for a comeback after leaving the party at the time of the peace treaty with Egypt). Also "losing" were the designated nominee for the new immigrants, Yuli Koshorovsky, and the designated nominee from the Druse community, veteran Knesset

member Assad Assad, provoking considerable bitterness in both communities and requiring serious damage control measures.

Another problem with the primaries that provoked bitterness was that choosing to run on the countrywide list, one had to receive over a hundred thousand votes to win a safe place on the ticket, while running in a district, one could receive as few as 2,000 votes to achieve the same success. The districts were also of disparate size, compounding the problem. Hence the final result was hardly a clear-cut reflection of the will of the party's members or their choices in rank order. However, it was a compromise between the attempt to democratize and the realities of the politics of each party.

The Maturity of the Voters' Response

Despite these problematic elements, the voter response was excellent and demonstrated real maturity on the part of the parties' rank-and-file. This was a "closed" primary; that is to say, only dues-paying party members could vote. Despite several days of very bad weather, over two-thirds of Labor members voted and over 55 percent of Likud's membership, good turnouts by any standard. Not only that, but their voting showed considerable reflection, each party's voters in their own way. Hence, the results of the Labor vote maintained strong support for the peace process but gave some extra weight to those who were known to favor a tough line on security. The thrust of the Likud list was less clear, partly because of Tzomet and Gesher, but it continued to reflect the party's ambivalence in choosing between the peace process and "Likud's traditional national goals."

In both cases the party leaders, Shimon Peres and Binyamin Netanyahu, headed the list, having been chosen beforehand in special party central committee elections to carry the party's banner. In the primaries themselves, Uzi Baram, the Minister of Tourism in the present government, led the Labor list. He is considered one of Labor's leading doves and the media made a big deal of his success as a swing to the left. A more likely explanation is that he received a very large sympathy vote because his wife had just died and he himself had had health problems. A similar development had occurred last time when Shaul Amor of the Likud went to the primaries having just recently lost his leg, and was favored accordingly on the Likud list.

Otherwise, Labor's top ten reflected a trend toward those strong on the security issue. The big winner in the Labor primaries was former chief-of-staff and now

Foreign Minister Ehud Barak. He was engaged in a struggle with Haim Ramon to see who would be in the best position to succeed Peres in the next elections.

After being elected on the Labor ticket in 1992, Ramon had broken away to set up his own list for the Histadrut elections and had beaten the Labor list to take control of the Histadrut, which he proceeded to drastically overhaul (his supporters say "reform"; his opponents, "wreck"). Rabin tried to bring him back to the party before his assassination and when he was killed, Ramon used that as an excuse to come back. Barak had taken a six-month leave between the end of his service as chief-of-staff and his entry into politics for appearances sake and then plunged right in at the top, carrying an heir apparent's baton in his knapsack. The two were running neck-and-neck in the surveys, but at the polls themselves Barak won handily. No doubt, the Histadrut activists voted against Ramon to "punish" him. It was reported in the press that Ramon only came in seventh among the Jewish voters in the Labor primaries and that it was the Arab voters who gave him overwhelming support. Barak's victory, however, was dampened by Baram's success, especially since the latter immediately announced that he would run for the nomination for prime minister the next time it became available.

The big winners in the Likud were Yitzhak Mordechai, Ariel Sharon, David Levy, and Binyamin Netanyahu, in that order. Mordechai, a newcomer, surprisingly led the list. He did better than any of the veteran party members who faced an open contest. He just recently retired as the commander of Israel's Northern Command, which means he was responsible for fighting Hizbollah in Lebanon and was the field commander in Israel's only active "war." He joined the Likud. Although deeply concerned about Israel's security, he is not ideological like most of the other leading Israeli politicians, nor does he pretend to be. He flirted with both the Labor party and Likud before deciding for the latter, apparently because he got a better deal from them. He is a Sephardi of Kurdish background and hence can possibly replace David Levy in the affections of that community, although he himself very much avoids raising those kinds of issues in public affairs. He comes across strongly as a bluff, honest man, which is very useful in politics. His first place finish makes him a leading contender for high office in the Likud.

Sharon more or less completed his rehabilitation as a politician by accepting Netanyahu's victory as party leader and then going out and working very hard to assure his success within the party and hopefully for

him in the general elections as well. Sharon was the architect of the Likud-Gesher-Tzomet linkage, the joint list which, along with the terrorist attacks, put Netanyahu back into the race as a full contender. Sharon's ability to control his own ambitions and direct them in ways that strengthen his political position rather than weaken it achieved all that he could have hoped for. He placed fifth on the Likud list, since the first three positions had been reserved for Netanyahu, Levy, and Eitan.

David Levy won big because he was able to sell Likud his demand for seven seats for Gesher, when he probably would have won no more than three in the general election. Netanyahu simply needed him that much. Thus he overcame his humiliation of 1992, but won no additional friends in the Likud who see his "unknowns" or at least untried ahead of other party activists on the Likud list because of the deal.

Binyamin Netanyahu won because he had a unified national camp behind him that had carried out a primary election with the requisite dignity and sobriety, thus strengthening his image as leader of his party.

At one and the same time the top of the Likud list strengthened the Likud image as the party most concerned with Israel's security and at the same time brought a group of pragmatists — Netanyahu, Eitan, Levy, Mordechai, Sharon — into key positions. In fact, of the Likud's top ten there is only one principled hard-liner, Ze'ev (Benny) Begin, and in the second ten only one, Uzi Landau. All the others can be expected to be pragmatists on the peace issue.

More Extreme Yet More Pragmatic

Thus both the Labor and Likud lineups moved more toward the center than may have been expected in closed primaries where party members who generally are more ideological than pragmatic have the dominant voice.

In the end, because of the intelligence and maturity of the Israeli voter, the primaries, with all their faults, proved themselves better than anyone had a right to expect. As a result there is already talk of making them open primaries next time whereby any citizen can go to the polls, declare his or her party choice, and be allowed to vote. There may be other changes as well, but sooner or later the problems in the overall structure are likely to lead to electoral reform of the entire system on the basis of some mixture of district and proportional representation.

In the meantime, Israel now faces the general election next month. At the present moment, Peres and

Netanyahu and their two parties are running neck-and-neck in the polls, with Peres slightly ahead but well within the 3-4 percent margin of error common to such surveys, which is probably even greater in Israel because of the "quick and dirty" nature of most surveys here which ignore significant segments of the population in order to reduce costs. So Israel has a horserace before it. The black humor going around is that in the last analysis the election will be decided by the Hamas; that is to say, if there is a terrorist attack in the week before the vote, it will make a decisive difference. Let

us hope that Israeli voters will be able to make their choices on the basis of reflection rather than passion when May 29 comes.

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Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He has been co-editor of the "Israel at the Polls" series of books on the Israeli national elections since 1977.

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