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THE ISRAELI ELECTION CAMPAIGN — 1999

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The National Debate is Over / Style and Not Content / Sectoral Interests Instead of National Issues / Election Demographics / Possible Scenarios / Labor's New Image

The Israeli election campaign has, up until now, been boring and of little consequence. It has been void of almost any ideological or policy issues. Debate over national issues has given way to the politics of populism.

The National Debate is Over

The two major political parties, Labor and Likud, traditionally gave focus to the people on national questions. The future of the territories and the peace process divided the nation but, at the same time, served as an integrating force in an otherwise fragmented society. All segments of Israeli society, from the Arab minority on the left to the ultra-Orthodox on the right, were compelled to focus on and debate and vote on the overarching national issue of territories for peace vs. the greater Land of Israel.

Two things have happened that have blurred this national focus in Israel's election campaign of 1999. Likud, in accepting the principle of land for peace, has divested itself of ideological fealty to the greater Land of Israel. The Labor party, in opting for a change of

name to the One Israel party, is competing for the center of the political map. Divested of its Histadrut-May Day-socialist persona, Labor is vying with Likud and the new Center party as both right and left become outdated partisan political verbiage.

With little if any policy issues being debated in this election campaign, it seems to have become a beauty contest between three macho men trying to convince the electorate that "anything they can do, I can do better."

Style and Not Content

With the debate over national issues stifled, if not silenced, the campaign is focusing on polls and personalities. The 1999 election campaign, to date, is characterized more by style than content. There is much heat and very, very little light. Epithets, insults, and harangues, rather than debate and discussion, characterize the campaign.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's spin-doctor from New York has set the tone. The Likud campaign concentrates on accusing the oppo-

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sition of being "leftist." "Leftist" has become a label and a stigma. Leftists are weak and do not have the backbone to stand up to the Palestinians, the Arab world, the European Union, and the United States. Rather, they will surrender and give in at every turn. They would divide everything — the people, the country, Jerusalem, the Jewish world. Only the right is strong and steadfast.

The Labor party engages in its own labeling and stigmatization. The Likud is accused of being fanatic and right-wing extremist. The Likud campaign slogan, "A strong leader for a strong nation," is labeled by the left as fascist in tone and reminiscent of Germany in the 1930s.

Barak is depicted as weak and mistake prone. Netanyahu is characterized as a liar who has betrayed his closest associates. Yitzhak Mordechai, the leader of the new centrist party, is viewed as indecisive and rudder-less.

The current election campaign is made for the media. It is made for television, where soundbytes replace policy discussion and verbal brawls substitute for debate. The tone of the campaign becomes more vituperative and shrill every day.

Sectoral Interests Instead of National Issues

Along with the debate over national issues being cut off, the growth of small political parties has shifted the focus away from any national agenda to sectoral partisan interests. The so-called electoral reform, instituted in the 1996 election, has radically altered Israel's political culture. The direct election of the prime minister allows voters to choose a candidate for prime minister from one party and to vote for a Knesset slate from another party. This has given disproportionate political power to small and mid-sized parties representing particular sectors of the population, while at the same time causing the decline of the two major parties, Labor and Likud. The result is not just political fragmentation, which prevents effective governance, but also a radical change in the political agenda of the nation. The increased political power of the small parties has shifted the focus from critical national issues to single-issue sectarian political agendas. Political party platforms and ideology have given way to what has been dubbed the "politics of public opinion polls." In the absence of clearly defined policy issues, political

parties are scrambling to latch on to anything with which they might attack the opposition. Bringing the boys home from Lebanon by next Hanukkah was last week's issue. The campaign then shifted over to the debate as to whether opposition leader Ehud Barak was a hero or a coward when he served as chief-of-staff of the IDF. And if that was not enough, then the tension and anxiety which gripped all of Israel as they awaited the verdict in the Arye Deri trial seemed to loom far more ominous than any Oslo or Wye peace agreements.

Election Demographics

Without the deep divide and national debate which gripped Israel obsessively for these past thirty years, Israel's political map is being torn apart and stitched back together. The final count is in. There are fifty-four political parties that have registered for the May 17th election. Israel's four and a half million voters will have a political smorgasbord to choose from. The voting register lists the names of 4,496,515 voters, of whom approximately 670,000 will be voting for the first time — 500,000 voters who have turned eighteen since the last election and over 150,000 new immigrants. The politics of demography favor the Likud. Youngsters on the eve of their military service tend to be right wing, as do the new immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Since the "revolution" of the Likud's Menachem Begin in 1977, the Labor party has held the short end of the demographic stick. Roughly, Labor appeals to Ashkenazi and Arab voters, while the Likud draws its support from Jews of North African origin, the religious, and the former Soviet Union. Yitzhak Rabin was Labor's only leader who in recent times broke the Likud's electoral lock, and then only barely, as a result of the then-fluidity of the Russian vote as well as a split in the right-wing camp in the 1992 election.

Possible Scenarios

This time around the fragmented right-wing ideologues, led by Benny Begin and Rehavam Ze'evi, have joined together. Herut, Tekuma, and Moledet have merged into one bloc. As the last of the true ideologues, their combined effort may garner them as many as eight to ten seats in the next Knesset. Whether that will be enough to entice

Netanyahu into a right-wing coalition government together with the religious parties and the Russian parties is questionable.

The other scenario would have the three self-proclaimed center parties join together in a coalition. The Likud, Labor, and Center parties would form a coalition government without the blackmail of the ultra-Orthodox parties or the anti-peace process ideologues on the right.

Polls have shown that fully 75 percent of the Israeli public supports the Wye Plantation peace agreement with the Palestinians, indicating that there is consensus on peace-making, long the most divisive issue in this country. The new political realignment, which is shoving the right wing to the periphery, seems to be offering an opportunity for a groundbreaking event — namely, a broad coalition without the ultra-Orthodox and the right wing.

The latest opinion polls show that it is highly unlikely that a prime minister will be elected in the May 17th elections. With four candidates in the race, no one will achieve a majority. This means there will be a runoff election between the two leading candidates on June 1st. The latest polls show that in the four-way race, Netanyahu would garner 33 percent of the vote, Ehud Barak 31 percent, Yitzhak Mordechai 18 percent, and Benny Begin 4 percent.

In a second round, if the two candidates are Netanyahu and Barak, the polls show that Barak would win by 46 percent to 41 percent for Netanyahu. If Mordechai were the second candidate, he would beat Netanyahu by an even greater margin, 50 percent to 37 percent.

Given these statistics, the campaign is moving in two directions. On the one hand, there are supposedly already secret negotiations between Labor and the new Center party about the possibility of joining together behind the candidate most likely to beat Netanyahu in the election. If there is one issue common to both parties, it is the passionately held belief that Netanyahu must be beaten for the sake of Israel's well-being.

Labor's New Image

In the absence of such a merger, the other direction being taken is the attempt by both Labor and the Center party to broaden their base of support. The Center party's Yitzhak Mordechai as number one over his three Ashkenazi compatriots

— Shahak, Meridor, and Milo — hopes to appeal to Sephardi Likud supporters. His visit to Shas spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef and his kissing of the rabbi's beard is meant to draw away some of that Shas support for Netanyahu.

What the Center party has done in the person of its leader, the Labor party is trying to do on a party level. Secularist and Ashkenazic Ehud Barak cannot appeal directly to those Likud constituents even after his apology for past discrimination against the "second Israel." Instead, Barak has created the One Israel ticket in order to attract voters who would not support him for prime minister if he were heading a ticket named the Labor party.

The inclusion of former Likudnik and Geshar party leader David Levy as number three on the One Israel list, after Ehud Barak and Shimon Peres, is meant to attract Jews of North African origin who have traditionally seen Labor as an Ashkenazi, elitist, socialist, leftist party that looked down on them.

The One Israel coalition has also recruited the moderate, peace-oriented, religious Meimad party to demonstrate that the Labor party is not anti-religious and does value Jewish tradition. By dropping the Labor label and adding Sephardi and Orthodox religious dimensions, they hope to make inroads in Likud's demographic advantage.

Although the strategy is to give Labor a brand new image in the eyes of the general public, there are those who doubt that Labor's new look will have much impact. It is far from clear whether this gambit will work for Labor, since Levy may no longer have the appeal he once commanded and Meimad may have only limited appeal to increasingly fervent and nationalist religious Jews.

On the other hand, the new Center party does seem to be making inroads among former Likud supporters. Several thousand Center party enthusiasts gathered in Tel Aviv at their campaign kick-off rally. According to estimates, fully 60 percent of the participants that evening were former Likud supporters, with the rest having come over from Labor ranks. Unfortunately for Likud, their party bylaws allow any member of their Central Committee access to the computer tapes of the over 100,000 registered party members. This means that both Yitzhak Mordechai and his compatriot Dan Meridor have access to these lists and are using them to recruit Likudniks to the Center party.

The proliferation of political parties along with political leaders crossing over not only to new parties but also to what were once rival camps, shows how fluid Israel's political scene has become. In past elections it was said that there was only a 2 percent floating vote in the electorate. Voters were firmly and ideologically committed either to the left or to the right, to Likud or to Labor. Election campaigns were targeted on the 2 percent floating vote. All that has changed.

The 1999 campaign is deteriorating into a sec-

tarian, divisive, vituperative campaign. The agenda and tone is too negative, too personal, and too populist. Little wonder that many Israelis are beginning to turn off rather than to turn out for this campaign.

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