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## THE 1989 ISRAELI LOCAL ELECTIONS: WHAT HAPPENED?

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**The Continued Rise of the Likud as a Centrist Party / No Referendum on Likud Foreign Policy / Decline of the Labor Party Machine / The Religious Parties Deal for Benefits / The New Zionist Left — Israeli "Greens" / The Rise of Fundamentalism in the Arab Sector / The New Importance of the Mayors**

On February 28, 1989, Israelis went to the polls for the second time in four months to choose the mayors and local council members in about 150 municipalities around the country. To the surprise of many, the Likud won a massive victory, demonstrating its grass-roots power and confirming that its narrow victory in the November 1988 Knesset elections rested on a far stronger base of voter support than those elections indicated. In what ways were those local victories significant? The answers to that question tell us much about a hidden dimension of state-building in Israel.

Local government is one of the hidden success stories in Israel where the observer can view with satisfaction substantial improvements in both the political and the governmental processes over the years. The fact that even the

candidates in the recent local elections kept referring to the issue of who governs locally as a matter of choosing who picks up the garbage rather than looking at all that local government has to do in the fields of education, health, welfare and culture only reflects the low self-image of local authorities, but it is really not an accurate description of the importance of local government in Israel or of the changes which have made it, on the whole, the most efficient branch of Israel's civilian public sector.

In the last two decades there have been quite a few basic changes in the local arena. Since the 1960s, local government in general is the place where progress toward political and governmental maturity in Israel can be seen most clearly.

Israel's long-standing problem of

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social integration was first resolved in the local political arena where today no ethnic or communal group can complain that it is underrepresented in local politics. By the late 1960s, local government gave full representation to the various communities. A decade later, the local arena had an impact on Israel's other political arenas in that respect as the young Sephardic mayors elected in the development towns surfaced as bright new lights in the Knesset, first in the Likud and, more recently, in the Labor party as well.

### **The Continued Rise of the Likud as a Centrist Party**

The 1989 local elections saw Likud gain control of most of the major cities and almost all of the development towns. For the past five years Labor controlled cities with a total population of 1,150,000, as compared to 600,000 for the Likud; that situation is now reversed. In addition to retaining Tel Aviv, Herzliya and Netanya, Likud wrested Holon, Beersheba, Ramat Gan, Petah Tikva and Ashdod from Labor, and Tiberias from a National Religious Party mayor.

The Likud victory was, in a sense, the completion of what the Likud started in 1977, that is to say, the establishment of the Likud as a full, firmly rooted and equal contender for political power with the Labor party, if not the majority party in the country. It also reflected the movement of the Likud toward the center of Israel's political spectrum, so that, as Asher Arian noted when analyzing the Knesset elections, the Likud has become, for all intents and purposes, the centrist party in Israel today (see VP:83 "The 1988 Israeli Elections - Questions of Identity").

Additionally, the election results demonstrated that the Likud has acquired the organizational capacity to take advantage of the demographic trends that are running in its favor, whereby younger people tend to vote Likud more than older and Sephardim tend to vote Likud more than Ashkenazim. This time the Likud was able to translate those factors to its

advantage in local elections where turnout is dependent upon organization to a much greater extent than in Knesset elections. On the other hand, as the tremendous anti-Labor feeling that originally brought people to Likud has faded to some extent, in each election there is a larger percentage of people who decide how to vote based on other considerations. Hence there was a decline in the youth and Sephardic anti-Labor vote per se. Another sign of growing political maturity was a greater tendency toward split-ticket voting, the opting for a charismatic local personality of one party for mayor, while at the same time supporting another party for the city or local council.

### **No Referendum on Likud Foreign Policy**

The local election results were not a national referendum on Likud foreign policy, even though Prime Minister Shamir interpreted them as such. Shamir's interpretation may be erroneous, but it is one that can only strengthen his resolve, especially since it does show that his party is clearly in the saddle.

The results in fact reflected the local issues in each local race. There certainly were people who voted Likud because they vote Likud for national and not for local reasons, as there always are, but it seems that most people did not vote on that basis.

The election offered further evidence of the political advantages that have come from the direct election of mayors. Since it was introduced in 1978, the direct election of mayors has been a very substantial success in every respect. There is a lot of evidence that the voters in this election chose individuals regardless of party, within very broad parameters, as they have in the earlier mayoralty elections. While party is still important, the direct election of mayors has allowed a greater focus on local issues than would otherwise be the case.

One spinoff of this success is that serious consideration is now being given to the direct election of the head of the Israeli

government, which could only have come after the positive experience with the mayors. Such an idea had been far removed from most Israelis' conception of what a proper system of government was like, weaned as they were on the parliamentary system; but now many want to replicate the local system for the state as a whole. Support for the change comes from across the entire political spectrum, making it a rare non-partisan issue. Six Knesset members have introduced private bills suggesting one or another system of choosing the head of government separately for a fixed term of office and the government is seriously considering the idea.

### **Decline of the Labor Party Machine**

Likud's greatest triumph was to be found in its ability to field a better organization over much of the country. In the past, Labor has been especially known for the strength of its organization. The old Mapai party, Labor's predecessor and core, was a political machine par excellence. More than that, in addition to the usual organization common to all political machines, it also could call upon institutions like the Histadrut, the Histadrut companies, and the kibbutzim for resources, for buses and cars to transport voters to the polls, for people to work at the polls even in communities where Labor itself might not have had enough activists to do so. This year, by all preliminary accounts, Likud was stronger than Labor in this respect. Many people in the kibbutzim simply refused to work for Labor because of their own problems with the Labor party or problems related to the economic situation of the kibbutzim. Beyond that, Likud had finally built an organization that could turn out its voters on election day.

Forty-eight percent of eligible voters in the Jewish sector voted in the elections. Throughout the Western world, turnout in local elections is lower than turnout for national or parliamentary elections. This is true in Israel as well. While it is still

much higher than the United States or Canada, it is much lower than in Knesset elections. In the Arab sector, the turnout was extremely high -- over 80 percent -- and in some localities exceeded 90 percent of eligible voters. No doubt this is because the vast majority of Israeli Arabs live in their own municipalities, making local elections their only opportunity to choose their own leaders. In other words, salience is clearly a major factor affecting voter turnout.

The impact of local issues and candidates was paramount. In a large number of localities, the Likud put up the better candidates in the eyes of a majority of the voters, which is why they did so well. Responsible for conduct of the Likud campaign was Foreign Minister Moshe Arens, Shamir's closest associate, and M.K. David Magen, Ariel Sharon's key man. Both deserve much of the credit for the Likud victory. They prepared the Likud for the local elections by actually intervening in local affairs to promote "good" candidates in place of mediocre local activists. This was accepted by the local branches of the party. According to the new game as played by the Likud, the national party took care of its local branches by putting in the right people, a tactic that succeeded quite well. Unfortunately this is an ominous sign for the local politicians who are getting the message that they are not capable of selecting good candidates and for the local autonomy gained over the past several years. Labor, on the other hand, was internally quite fragmented. In about two dozen localities there were Labor people competing on two or even three lists. Hence at best their vote was divided.

What was the impact of the election results on the leadership of the Labor party? Under normal circumstances one would have said that this would have been the last nail in Shimon Peres's political coffin. While there are never normal circumstances in Israel, the odds are strong, though not overwhelming, that he will not lead the party in the next Knesset

elections. On the other hand, the future of the Labor party depends upon whether they can make a change of leadership or whether Peres can somehow rebuild the party while staying in power.

The next contest between the two parties will be in the Histadrut elections in the fall of 1989. Since some two-thirds of all Israelis belong to the Histadrut, these are contests with countrywide significance. Not surprisingly, Labor has always won those elections overwhelmingly. Now, for the first time everybody is talking as if the Likud has a chance to pass the one-third mark in the Histadrut elections. This talk may work to the disadvantage of Likud because if they do not, then everybody will say that they failed. So for Likud it is not an advantage to be touted as having gained strength like that, but for Labor the results of the next round are clearly a worry.

#### **The Religious Parties Deal for Benefits**

With regard to the religious parties, this election witnessed a modest extension of the process begun back in 1981 when Agudat Israel partially joined the Begin coalition, a process which strengthened with the rise of Shas in 1984, and which really took off last November with the integration of the ultra-Orthodox parties into the political system. Working in local elections is one of the most prominent signs of integration into the political system and the religious parties achieved significant benefits for themselves as a result.

One example of this could be seen in Ramat Hasharon where out of 43,000 citizens there are about 1,000 religious voters split among 4 parties. Due to the fact that they voted as a bloc, for the first time they managed to gain a seat on the city council. They also made a deal beforehand with the Labor candidate for mayor and nearly all of the religious voters voted for him because they had won advance agreement to receive a number of benefits. In many other localities the religious parties gave their support to the

Likud, which is one of the reasons why the Likud won in many places where the power of Labor and Likud was almost equal.

Any assessment of the impact of the religious parties in the local elections must consider the specific situation in each community. In many communities there are few conflicts over issues of religion, while in some, such as Jerusalem or Petah Tikva, there have been chronic problems. It may be expected that the religious parties in the local arena will gain or at least maintain their power irrespective of what happens on the statewide scene. The one party that may still be expected to gain in strength is Shas, and this at the expense of Likud. It depends on the issues that come up, because a good number of not necessarily religious people would vote for Shas for ethnic or other traditional attitudes which are prevalent among Sephardim.

#### **The New Zionist Left -- Israeli "Greens"**

The Zionist left, which has acquired more cohesiveness as the political voice of the Israeli "doves," especially as the Labor party has lost power, puts on a different and very successful face in the local elections. Locally, the parties of the Zionist left -- the Citizens Rights Movement (CRM) and Mapam, plus the more centrist Shinui -- attract the suburban-type voters of the upper middle class. These are the people who want more efficient, effective and cleaner municipal government. They are environmentalists and see themselves on the progressive side of issues. In some cases, two or three of the parties joined together in a common local front, representing Israel's equivalent of the European "Green" party phenomenon which is finding expression around the world. The curious thing is that as CRM and even Shinui become even more leftward oriented in the Knesset elections and have begun to form a more cohesive bloc, they have also gained strength for very different reasons in the local elections.

In the actual campaign, the left and center-left was split, with CRM and Labor

competing in almost every city. In Ramat Hasharon, for example, the richest families voted for CRM and Shinui. It was not only a matter of local interest but rather a sign that they simply are no longer willing to vote for Labor anymore. With CRM running so strong locally, Labor has a real problem on the local level. This emerged as a trend in the Knesset elections and is being continued in the local arena. At the same time, the parties of the far right did not compete in the local elections this time, allowing the Likud to succeed by sweeping the entire right, plus the center.

### **The Rise of Fundamentalism in the Arab Sector**

In the Arab sector, the big news was the arrival in strength of Islamic fundamentalism. The impact of this phenomenon is not yet clear because part of it was a reaction against the inefficient, unconcerned, oligarchic, entrenched governments of the old elites -- the leaders of the notable families -- in a situation where there have not been many opportunities even for the circulation (or rotation) of elites. Under such conditions, any movement for change requires cohesion around a party that came out with a very strong message, which the Islamic fundamentalist party could do. On the other hand, there is no question that Islamic fundamentalism is sweeping the entire Arab world. Only the future will tell us to what degree the voting results were a reaction to local conditions and to what degree they were part of the worldwide trend toward the entry of religious fundamentalists into politics.

In the Knesset elections, Labor received substantial Arab support, though in numbers smaller than in previous elections. This factor was not present in the local elections where most Arabs voted in their own municipalities for their own parties. In fact, the Likud advantage in November 1988 became even greater in the local elections because the Jewish vote was separate and distinct.

### **The New Importance of Mayors**

Today mayors see themselves as leaders who are supposed to initiate new projects for the good of their communities. In previous years, the slogan was: "We have no money of our own. It is the central government that is responsible for housing and education, etc." Today, it is quite clear that many mayors have succeeded in changing the face of their own cities, changes that are more than superficial. Local leaders see the successes in other cities and want the same for their own communities. They are more willing to assume the responsibility for bringing about change in their own communities because now their publics expect it, knowing that others have succeeded.

Even though many people treat local government as unimportant, when looking at the future generation of leadership in Israel they point with pride to the new crop of successful mayors, most of whom are not ex-generals brought in from outside the political process but truly local products who have come up from within their local communities.

In the 1984 Knesset elections, a large number of mayors were included in the Likud list. This definitely strengthened the Likud as the party with a younger generation of leaders who were ready to be integrated into state politics and who were given responsible positions in the state government. In the 1988 Knesset elections, there were few additions of this sort in the Likud list, but Labor took the cue and included a number of mayors on its Knesset list, with good results. Many politicians now see local government as a more attractive, vibrant and politically worthwhile place to invest their efforts, realizing that it can be a springboard to the Knesset, bypassing the traditional 20 or 30 year period of working up through the party ranks.

It is also becoming more attractive to run for local office today because to be a Knesset member is less important now than to be mayor of Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, or even smaller cities. In terms of

recognition, benefits and power, the position of mayors today compares much more favorably than it used to to that of Knesset members, especially backbenchers.

Outwardly, Israel today still has the appearance of a power pyramid -- a hierarchical system with the government on top, the Knesset just below it, and local government at the bottom, all tied together by the "establishment," the parties, and the bureaucracy. In fact, Israel is on its way to becoming a compound republic, in fact, if not in form, as local governments assert themselves through a new generation of leaders. The 1989 local elections reaffirmed this trend but also brought the first signs of a new effort on the part of the party establishments to reassert control. That is an issue that will be fought out in the 1990s.

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