

# JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 258 14 Tammuz 5752 / 15 July 1992

## THE ISRAELI KNESSET ELECTIONS, 1992: A FIRST ANALYSIS

Daniel J. Elazar

**Why the Surprise? / Impact of Raising the Threshold / Rabin's Immediate Problems / Likud Deserved to Lose / Labor Must Consolidate / Greens and Yuppies on the Left / Realignment on the Right / Changing Fortunes among the Haredim / Arab Votes for Labor / Religion and State / Few Economic Differences / Forming a Coalition**

### Why the Surprise?

The results of the elections for Israel's Thirteenth Knesset, held on June 23, 1992, have been treated in Israel as parallel to those of 1977 when Likud came to power. Then we heard expressions of surprise at the notion that power could change hands. The notion that it could change back without it being a revolution should not be surprising. Those of us who are used to political systems having two major parties contending for power are not surprised when these changes take place and there is no reason to be surprised given the considerations that took place in Israel. Nevertheless, this process of normalized change of power is relatively new to Israel and it does have important implications for the constitutional health of the Israeli body politic.

The first point of note was the great maturity of the Israeli voters. This was a very quiet election. Some observers took this as a sign of apathy, but it was not apathy. There was just nothing to make noise about. People were soberly thinking

things through, changing voting patterns, changing their normal predilections, to do what they felt had to be done. It was not easy.

There was no party that was particularly attractive to the vast majority of Israelis, to the 80 percent of the population that is in the center. Rabin was personally more attractive than anybody else proposed or on the horizon, but even he is not exactly a fiery, charismatic leader. He is also a known quantity; he is not somebody new to the political scene.

Yet his party had some drawbacks; they carried some heavy burdens. Precisely because they had done such an excellent job with their new nominating system that incorporated primary elections, the results put them at a disadvantage in the general election. As we know in the United States, the people who vote in primaries tend to be the purists of a party and they move the party towards its more purist position, whereas mass parties have to seek support from a broad center and cannot afford to be so purist. So the triumph of so many

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor.  
13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, 92107, Israel; Tel. 02-619281, Fax 972-2-619112. © Copyright. All rights reserved.  
ISSN: 0334-4096.

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

dovish types on the Labor party list honestly reflected the mood of the membership of the Labor party, but it made Rabin's position that much more difficult in running in the general election.

Another sign of the maturity of the Israeli voters was in the way they insisted that the campaign be conducted. For example, when Likud tried to smear Rabin on account of his personal weaknesses, the public indicated overnight that they would have none of that and it was dropped, with Likud strongly backpeddling. Similarly, there were many fewer complaints of election disturbances at the polls this time than ever before in Israel's history.

### **Impact of Raising the Threshold**

The constitutional changes made in the Twelfth Knesset have already had an impact. One new law that raised the threshold of votes needed to get into the Knesset from 1.1 percent to 1.5 percent caused an earthquake in Israel's political system. This change, coupled with the wave of new immigrants, meant that the number of votes a party needed for its first seat in the Knesset went up from 22,000 last time to about 40,000 this time, and it worked. Single member parties did not get in. While 26 parties competed, many of which looked initially attractive because people were so unhappy with the general situation, a lot of people hesitated to vote for them in the end because of the higher threshold and the increased chance that their vote would be wasted.

For example, the owner of Pikanti, a successful Israeli-style fast-food chain, entered the race, perhaps for publicity, and suddenly he started rising in the polls. People who did not want to vote for Labor or Likud considered voting for Pikanti. But in the end, they feared his ability to cross the threshold and his support ebbed below it.

### **Rabin's Immediate Problems**

Yitzhak Rabin faces the problem of knowing that he was elected by a vast center that does not care all that much for his party and certainly cared for it a little less after that party moved so visibly to the left. Rabin also knows he has Shimon Peres trying to do everything to bring him down from within. Shimon Peres is much like Ariel Sharon; his style is different, but he amorally pursues the same kind of personal power. He is already trying to undermine Rabin. Rabin's response was to declare that he was going to act as if he were directly elected as prime minister on the grounds that the Labor party had officially appeared in the campaign and on

the ballot as "The Labor Party Headed by Rabin," even though that constitutional change is only due to be implemented statewide after the next elections. He will choose his cabinet ministers, he will take charge and make the policy. He may not be able to make it stick, but to start out of the gate that way gave him a substantial chance which he would not have had if he had simply followed the old way and decided to divide governmental power according to the strengths of the various camps within the Labor party. Rabin also resisted pressure from Meretz to first form a center-left government with them and then invite others to join it.

Rabin will do what he can to give the cabinet portfolios to the people he wants. This may include, for example, a natural alliance between him and the bloc led by Israel Kessar, secretary-general of the Histadrut, who wants to move over to the government, though Rabin may have to pay a certain price, such as a hold on hospital reform. In one scenario, if Kessar can take over a major domestic portfolio and reach in a number of directions to help consolidate Labor's vote in the development towns and poorer neighborhoods and leave Rabin free to handle foreign affairs, security and peace, thus neutralizing Peres and his people, that would probably be Rabin's preference.

### **Likud Deserved to Lose**

There was a general consensus in Israel, which included many of those who voted Likud as well as those who left them, that Likud deserved to lose. This feeling had little to do with Likud's policy vis-a-vis the territories or peace. Nor was Likud's building in the territories necessarily detrimental to the new immigrants or the disadvantaged because, leaving political considerations aside, the housing that the Likud-led government built just east of Kfar Saba is much more accessible and much more useful to most people than housing built in the Negev or the Galilee, and was subsidized to boot. The anti-Likud feeling was more one that Likud was misgoverning, that they had become fat and sloppy, and that the honesty of some that they had put in key positions was questionable. They were constantly fighting among themselves and the system that they used for nominating their ticket looked terrible to the public, especially in comparison to Labor's primaries. People generally felt that Likud had been in too long; it was time to get them out, time for a change.

Likud also paid a certain price for ideological single-mindedness. First of all, Yitzhak Shamir did not appear in the minimal kinds of ways in which one expects a head of government to appear, to say a good

word at the right moment, to raise the country's spirits at a difficult time. That was not his way. He has other talents but that is not one of them. Secondly, having focused so much on the question of settlements and territories, he was perceived to so lack interest in questions of unemployment, the economy, and his basic constituents' welfare that they rejected him. In analyzing the vote, we see that it was mostly those from the development towns and the underprivileged neighborhoods who had originally put Likud into power who now deserted him in droves.

The fight to succeed Shamir has already begun. This is important for Likud because it is likely that all the older contenders will kill each other off and then the talented new generation will move in and build a stronger party. Any democracy would want both of its two largest parties to be strong. The people in their 40s who will be taking over the party include leaders from the development towns such as Meir Sheerit and Moshe Katzav — the "paupers" — as well as the so-called Likud "princes," the children of the original Herutniks, such as Zeev Benyamin ("Benny") Begin, Dan Meridor, Uzi Landau, and Benyamin Netanyahu. The chances are very good that Benny Begin will be the leader that they agree upon. While he holds a very hard-line position on the peace process, he is both a very bright and a very honest man, and Likud could do a lot worse. However, if Likud should fail to begin rebuilding and these internal leadership fights go on forever, then the party will continue to dig its own political grave.

### Labor Must Consolidate

This time Labor did much that was right. Its primaries were a good idea. Its selection of Rabin was critical. They renamed the party "The Labor Party Headed by Rabin" and that actually won them the election. But what they complicated in their primaries was that the more ideological purists of the party took over the ticket. Labor now has a chance to seriously rebuild and to become a truly contending party again, but it still has a long way to go.

Likud has dropped down to 32 seats. That is a significant drop to a level reminiscent of Likud strength in the early 1970s, but Labor's 44 seats is not particularly more than Labor has been getting for a long time. Since a lot of that strength represents protest voting, those voters will have to be consolidated to Labor ranks if Labor is going to achieve any lasting gains. Next time Labor will be the incumbent party that will not have solved various insoluble problems, and it will

be blamed by everyone and could be in trouble unless it has some appropriate successes.

### Greens and Yuppies on the Left

Meretz (an acronym that forms the Hebrew word for energy), winning 12 seats, was the truly new phenomenon of this race. The seeds of Meretz, the federation of Mapam, Shinui, and Ratz — the Citizens Rights Movement, can be found in the local election campaigns of 1989, where the three, on a local basis, formed federated coalitions in various municipalities and did very well (see VP:87, "The 1989 Israeli Local Elections: What Happened?"). Mapam is receding from its avowed socialism and joined with the free marketers and those of the environmentalist/quality-of-life movement to form Meretz, the Israeli equivalent of the kind of parties that have emerged throughout most of the West, that are made up of younger, market-oriented, fiscally conservative, environmentally-oriented, quality-of-life populists, a combination of "Greens" and "yuppies." These are the people who are most attracted to Meretz for domestic policy, though they were attracted in this case because of foreign policy considerations too.

Meretz offers the public a number of well-known and attractive (to their constituents) leaders — Yair Tzaban, a veteran Mapam MK with a powerful reputation for straightforwardness; Shulamit Aloni, the veteran struggler for citizens' rights; Amnon Rubenstein, a leader of the constitutional reform movement; Yosi Sarid and Dedi Zucker, both outspoken and very visible on myriad issues.

### Realignment on the Right

The strength of the political right, which because of the failure of Tehiya may have given the perception of loss, was shifted around and may actually have grown. In the last Knesset, the parties now comprising the political left — Meretz and the Arabs — had a total of 16 seats (10+4+1+1); this time they have 17 (12+3+2), up 1. The political right, even including Mafdal (the National Religious Party), had 12 seats (5+3+2+2). Now, with Mafdal fully declared for the right, they have 17 (6+8+3), up 5.

Tzomet was even a bigger surprise than Meretz, winning 8 seats. It is the politically right equivalent of Meretz. In addition to those who voted for its policy on the territories, it attracted the voters who did not like the Meretz position on peace but who resembled them as quality-of-life populists. Meretz and Tzomet are much like two sides of the coin. The fact that

together they won 20 seats shows that there is a substantial bloc of voters of this particular kind. It would be noteworthy anywhere in the world when more than 15 percent of the vote goes to such environmental populist parties. (In one other way are the two parties mirror images of one another. Meretz has twelve "stars," while Tzomet has its leader, former IDF Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan, and seven unknowns. Yoash Tzidon, the party's previous number two who had been very successful as an MK, was only offered a lower place on the list. Was he becoming too popular?)

As part of its success, Tzomet helped to wipe out Tehiya, a party of the old political right that previously held three seats. Tehiya is the only party that has ever succeeded in uniting people from all three political camps — the Labor camp, the national camp, and the religious-Zionist camp — around a particular ideological issue, their shared perception of Eretz Israel. But their approach is one of the 1930s, not the 1990s, and they, too, were rent by internal quarrels. One of the lessons of this campaign is that parties whose factions quarreled visibly lost in this election, the voters apparently feeling that a party that was unable to keep peace and act respectably at home was not fit to govern.

The even more extreme Moledet, on the other hand, markets itself as a party of the new right whose leader, Rechavam Zeevi (Gandhi), talks a certain kind of hard, cold sense about security instead of taking the more "mystical" line of Tehiya. He does not talk about historic rights. He says if Israel does not want to end up like Yugoslavia, this is what we have to do. He only got 3 seats, but his language is more palatable to the people who are of that extreme than Tehiya's old-fashioned language.

The National Religious Party now has to be included in the political right. They crossed the line this time. Up until now they had publicly presented a more moderate face on general political issues because they had a major domestic political concern, namely, the preservation of their institutions and of the religious status quo in Israel. This time the party deserted that stance and moved far more to the right in their public campaign than their ticket reflected. Of Mafdal's first three candidates, Zevulun Hammer is centrist, Avner Shaki is on the right, and Yigal Bibi is quite dovish. The same pattern is continued on down their list. Their slogan, *Mafdal l'yamincha* (the National Religious Party at your right hand), said it as openly as possible.

This did not do them a disservice in the election. After all, they went up from 5 to 6 seats at a time when other religious parties were going down. The NRP has

usually been quite clever in capturing the mood that it needs to keep its strength. The two times that it did not were disastrous, but it may be back on course for itself in this way. Now, however, they are going to want to join the government because they are not going to want to be left out while their religious rivals claim the key ministries controlling religious patronage and educational resources. We are going to see what kind of steps they learn to dance in order to achieve that, if they can.

### Changing Fortunes among the Haredim

With the formation of the United Torah Front through the federation of Agudat Israel and Degel Hatorah, the two main Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox parties appeared as one. This ended up meaning that the Lubavitcher Hassidim did not campaign this time so they did not bring out those extra votes that the two parties had received last time. Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz, who, left out of Shas, was added to the UTF list in the hope of winning Sephardic votes, proved to have little following at the polls. Without Lubavitch on the scene, Degel Hatorah had no great rival to stimulate its people to turn out in the numbers they had previously. All of these factors combined caused them to decline from 7 seats to 4.

Shas, on the other hand, probably picked up a number of Likud voters who decided against Likud and saw in Shas the only people who have been paying attention to the development towns and the poorer urban neighborhoods over the last number of years, and whose El Hamaayan organization is bringing true benefits to them with their social service and educational programs. So Shas, with all its contradictions and anomalies, still offered something to its voters that they could not get any place else and maintained their 6-seat strength. It should be noted that Arye Deri of Shas was a good Minister of Interior. For example, he did more to bridge the gaps between services for Jews and those for Arabs than any other minister since the beginning of the state. He is smart and he is flexible.

### Arab Votes for Labor

The Arabs showed clear political sophistication by voting mostly for the mainstream Zionist parties, where their votes have more influence if they made a difference in the number of seats Labor received than they would if they received more Arab seats, since these latter would not be counted in determining who forms a government because of the mores of Israeli politics. And indeed, the Arab vote gave Rabin and the Labor-

left camp their winning margin over the right. But beyond that, their divisive tendencies continued and they wasted many of their votes in the fight between the Darowshe and Miari factions.

### Religion and State

Meretz and Tzomet share the same secularist-separationist approach to relations between religion and state. Interestingly, in this respect the Arabs probably are closer to the haredim. Indeed, one of Shas's seats may have been due to the Beduin vote.

The mainstream Jewish voters reject both extremes. They seem to prefer a kind of non-compulsory, non-binding respect for tradition. In a sense, the popularity of Avraham Burg, who placed third on the Labor list, immediately after Rabin and Peres, is because of what he symbolizes, reflecting this elasticity on the Labor side. He looks traditional, wears a kippa, but talks liberal. He is for drafting yeshiva students, letting people have free choice about how they want to live their lives, but chooses to carry on the tradition. This is a well-received message among the center, center-left, and center-right.

### Few Economic Differences

There is very little difference between the two major parties or any of the others these days on economic matters. They are all in favor of the principle of a free market, but none of them want Cousin Mordechai to be unemployed, much less their spouses or themselves. It is this intertwining of the economic structure with the social and communal network that makes economic change very difficult. There is nobody on the scene at this moment who seems to have the creative force to break through that and make people take the bitter medicine that they will have to take for a while in order to generate some real economic change. The only difference between a Labor-led government and a Likud-led one is that more money will go to Kupat Holim than used to and less money to settlements across the Green Line.

The economic issue also seems bound up in an intergenerational struggle. Above a certain age, the old-timers in the Labor camp think first of preserving Labor institutions, while many of the younger ones, some noted doves and some not, see the salvation of Labor in jettisoning those connections. They also are fiscally conservative, environmental and quality-of-life-oriented, and they will push for change. Whether they

succeed or not will be one of the major struggles in the new government.

### Forming a Coalition

My guess is that Rabin is not interested in a Labor-Meretz coalition as the anchor of his government. Instead, he will try to bring in as many of the small parties to the right of him as he can to free himself from too much dependence on those forces to his left. This almost certainly means one or both of the haredi parties, both of which need to go into this government because the Reichmann empire has collapsed. If they do enter the coalition, this could mean a huge addition to the Israeli taxpayer's bill. All the institutions previously supported by the Reichmanns know that this is their last year of guaranteed funding and the Jewish world is already being approached to pick up the institutional results of the Reichmann crash.

The haredi parties will likely go in to protect their government support, and the NRP will not be able to abide being outside when the haredim are inside. To see a haredi at the head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs means that all the rabbinical and other appointments that are part of the religious machinery will go to the haredim and have an impact for the next 30 or 40 years because these are permanent appointments, so the NRP is going to make an effort to come in as well. This is made more critical because the elections for the chief rabbis are next year. Rabin would look kindly upon such an effort if he can find some way to do it within the broad coalition that he puts together.

The best bet for entering the coalition after Meretz is probably Tzomet. This will be difficult because there are certain stated positions of both Meretz and Tzomet that make it very hard to bridge between them. But since on domestic issues their voters are quite similar and can live together if they can find some way to bridge the peace questions, Rabin will certainly encourage this and try to find a formula. If he is successful, we will see some very interesting progress along a number of fronts over the next several years. If he is not, there is always direct election of the prime minister waiting in the wings for the next elections.

\* \* \*

Daniel J. Elazar is President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.