

ISRAEL'S ELECTIONS TO THE 18TH KNESSET

Lars Hänsel

On February 10, the Israeli people elected their next parliament. The 18th Knesset elections became necessary when Ehud Olmert resigned and Tzipi Livni failed in her attempt to form a new coalition government. However, only twelve of the 33 parties in the campaign succeeded in jumping the two-percent hurdle. A group of five leading parties emerged: Kadima won 28 seats (i.e. 22.5 percent of the vote), Likud 27 (21.6 percent), Israel Beteinu 15 (11.7 percent), the Labour Party 13 (9.9 percent), and SHAS won 11 seats (8.5 percent). Lagging considerably behind, the other parties – United Torah Judaism, Raam-Taal, Hadash, Meretz, Beit Yehudi, Ichud Leumi, and Balad – won between three and five seats each. To the surprise of many, the Pensioners' Party is no longer represented in the Knesset. At 21, the number of women in the new parliament is unusually high, seven having been returned for Kadima alone.

Although the turnout was higher than expected at 65.2 percent, the declining trend of the past elections continued overall. Surveys found that 55 percent of the non-voters were women, and that the growing number of abstainers was due to the lack of distinctive characteristics and genuine alternatives among the major parties. At the end of the day, the positions of all parties were the same, and none of them had realistic solutions to offer.

Moreover, even major parties like Kadima or Likud are unable to form a majority government on their own, so that they are forced to form coalitions with minor parties, which gives the latter a chance to exert a great deal of pressure and enforce their own interests. Thus, for instance, large segments of the population would like to see civil marriage introduced and/or the building of further settlements halted, but it is steps like these that are prevented by the objections of minor religious parties. Furthermore, law experts point out that the electoral system itself is the reason why governments are unstable and people remain aloof from politics. This being so, there are debates going on about changing the electoral code, raising the percentage hurdle, and reconfiguring constituencies. Another problem lies in the high number of bills tabled, which amounted to 4,096 during the session of the 17th Knesset alone.

Because of the 'cast lead' military operation in the Gaza Strip, the election campaign was very short, nor was it paid much attention, especially as the core messages of Kadima and Likud remained moot for a long time. Like the minor parties, both Kadima and Likud concentrated on persons and mounted a great deal of negative campaigning. Thus, the Kadima cast doubt on Mr

Netanyahu's integrity, while the Likud trumpeted Mrs Livni's alleged incapability to fill the office of prime minister in the first place.

There can be no doubt that the military operation in the Gaza Strip affected the public mood before the election. The initiative against Hamas was endorsed by many Israelis, who also felt directly threatened by an Iranian government that might have nuclear weapons at its disposal. For this reason, many ranked security before negotiations with the Palestinians. While Ehud Barak and the Labour Party benefited only a little from this mood, the centre-right camp profited much more. Probably, many voters felt attracted to this camp as well as to the Kadima, particularly so as the military campaign remained indecisive for a time during which Hamas rockets kept hitting the south of Israel even after the campaign was launched. Another factor that may have contributed towards weakening Mr Barak personally and strengthening the centre-right camp is the fact that Mr Barak was standing not for prime minister but for secretary of defence.

Mrs Livni's attempt to form a coalition government after the resignation of Mr Olmert was unsuccessful because she rejected the demand of the SHAS to extend social benefits. Despite her failure, Mrs Livni tried to present herself as an incorruptible pioneer of a fresh start in politics. While the media highlighted her successful and swift career so far, they also focused on her inexperience. When she stated at the Herzliya security conference that peace with the neighbouring countries was a possibility for Israel, she impressed mainly the left camp and the swing voters. On the other hand, most of the votes lost by Mrs Livni and the Kadima went to the centre-right camp.

For quite some time, the popular favourite was the Likud led by Mr Netanyahu, who was anxious to display his competence in economics and national security. Thus, for example, he planned to build up the economy in the Palestinian territories while making sure that a Palestinian state could never be a serious threat to Israel. However, this message remained vague and the campaign of the Likud inconsistent. Likud did succeed in nearly doubling its vote, but it also lost potential voters particularly to Israel Beteinu.

Israel Beteinu's score of no less than 15 mandates caused quite a surprise. The party appeared especially attractive to the secular public, such as Russian immigrants and young voters. Its leader, Mr Lieberman, demanded that citizenship should be predicated first and foremost on loyalty towards the Jewish state and instrumentalized the tension between Jews and Arabs in the country. As Israel Beteinu and the Arab parties had declared their mutual enmity, Israel Beteinu owes its success not least to the radical positions of the Arab camp. Ultimately, Israel Beteinu would probably accept a division of the country, particularly as analysts believe that there has always been a

gap between the party's radical rhetoric and its pragmatic policy, which is quite capable of attracting a majority in the centre-right camp. Another remarkable fact is that a coalition with Israel Beteinu had not been categorically ruled out either by Mrs Livni or by Mr Netanyahu.

The Arabs constitute a major factor in the country's political system. Four Arab and/or Arab-Jewish parties – Raam-Taal, Hadash, Balad, and Da'am – competed for the votes of the Arabs. In fact, 82 percent of the Arabs living in Israel voted for these parties, while the others voted Zionist. The reason why the turnout among the Arabs was as low as 54 percent lies in their divided attitude towards the Jewish state. Now that alienation between Jews and Arabs has been increasing for some years, the Arabs are beginning to call their participation in the country's political system into question and to search for new ways to assert their own interests and demands. Criticized by the Jewish majority, the Future Vision Documents published by Arab intellectuals in 2006 demand that Israel should no longer be defined as a 'Jewish' state but as a state 'for all citizens'. Even so, there have so far been no debates among Jews about the escalating tension between the two groups.

The military campaign in the Gaza Strip also influenced the Arabs' behaviour in the elections. Many showed solidarity with the Palestinians there, and some even with Hamas. In the run-up to the elections, two Arab parties were barred for explicitly rejecting the Jewish state and supporting the armed struggle against Israel. Curiously enough, this was the first election in which Israel Beteinu received the votes of a considerable number of Arabs. The explanation for this apparent paradox may be the candidacy of Hamed Amar, a Druze who is employed by the municipal administration of the Arab city of Shfaram. Lastly, the Labour Party was the one which lost the greatest number of Arab votes.

President Shimon Peres entrusted the chairman of the Likud, Mr Netanyahu, with forming a coalition government because he was backed by more votes than Mrs Livni and the Kadima. There are two possible models: a government of national unity with the Likud and the Kadima at the core of the coalition, or a right-wing government led by the Likud itself. Sources say that the President as well as the majority of Israelis prefer the first option. Mr Netanyahu also appears to prefer a government of national unity, although his negotiations with the Kadima have made hardly any progress so far: Mrs Livni demands that the chair should be held in rotation, rejecting Mr Netanyahu's offer to leave high-ranking ministries and the presidency of the Knesset to the Kadima, saying that she would rather withdraw into opposition.

If a coalition government were formed with the Likud, Mrs Livni would certainly be attacked by her own left-wing voters. At the same time, strong forces within the party – Shaul Mofaz, Dalia Itzik, and Zeev Boim – are urging her to enter into a coalition, come what may. On the other hand, it is certain that the Labour Party will say no because Mr Barak has already announced his intention to go into opposition because of his party's bad performance in the elections. It is also generally assumed that Israel Beteinu will decline the coalition project, although this question may resolve itself: its chairman, Mr Liebermann, cannot accept any ministerial office because he is being investigated for fraud, breach of confidence, and money laundering.

If a coalition government led by Mr Netanyahu should be formed, negotiations with the Palestinians as well as with neighbouring countries like Syria will probably be continued, despite the Likud's traditionally radical rhetoric. It is also likely that attempts will be made to strengthen moderate Palestinian leaders. After all, as Mr Netanyahu announced, 'we need to strengthen the Palestinian moderates and weaken the radicals'. The greatest obstacle to success in these negotiations will probably be the split among the Palestinians themselves, for talks hardly make any sense in the absence of a leadership that represents all relevant Palestinian groups. One problem that arises in this context is the involvement of Hamas, an organization which rejects the state of Israel. At the same time, Mr Netanyahu is aware that negotiations with the Palestinians are necessary in view of the threat posed by Iran and its putative nuclear weapons. Very likely, there is no other option but to take a seat at the negotiating table.

IN: Auslandsinformationen 2/2009, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.144-148