THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS:
KADIMA HAS CARRIED THE DAY (FOR THE TIME BEING)
BUT LIKUD IS WINNING THE ELECTION

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By way of introduction

Concerned as they are about the security situation, the Israelis were not very interested in these elections, which they would have certainly preferred not holding. At the end of a campaign that was lifeless and dominated these past several weeks by the war on Hamas in Gaza, it was finally Kadima, the centrist party, which, provisionally, may be said to have won at the ballot box, taking one more seat than Likud. But while Tzipi Livni should logically be charged by Shimon Peres with the task of forming a government, it is Benjamin Netanyahu, seemingly defeated, who is better situated to put together a government coalition of the Right, mainly with the nationalist party Israel Beitenu of Avigdor Liberman. At a time when the challenges facing Israel are considerable, the first task of the future Prime Minister will be to ensure that his or her coalition − whatever it may be − is sufficiently strong and consistent for the long term.

The Israeli electoral system

Although no democracy is perfect, electoral systems are even less so. The Israeli system is a proportional system. Put another way, the various parties in contention receive a number of seats calculated prorata to the number of votes that they collect. And if this system has the merit of giving small (even micro) parties) the opportunity to participate in the political process, it has the enormous disadvantage of fragmenting the political scene and complicating the already difficult task of forming a government coalition. During these elections, 34 parties presented their electoral lists and 12 garnered enough votes to be represented in the Knesset.

The electoral system was called into question during the whole electoral campaign by numerous parties. First and foremost, by Avigdor Liberman, who recommends a presidential system of government in order to oust the Israeli Arabs from all representation in the Knesset. The nationalist leader even made this subject his main campaign argument and his electoral slogan: '*No loyalty, no citizenship*'.[1] True to the positions she took in the past, Tzipi

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[1] 'No loyalty, no citizenship'

Livni also repeatedly explained the need to adopt a presidential system. Finally, Ehud Barak also questioned the proportional system when he criticised the excessively high number of parties in contention.

In Israel, two historic parties, Labour (Ha'avoda) and Likud, have shared power for decades, sometimes, to be sure, at the price of ill-assorted alliances and thus of fragile coalition governments. The introduction of the direct election of the Prime Minister in 1996 allowed the small parties to increase their representation at the expense of the two major parties. This system was quickly perceived as an error and was finally modified in 2001. Any new change in the electoral system to strengthen the representation of these two parties would undoubtedly encourage stability of the government. However, such a change has not been possible because of the logical opposition of the small parties.

Apart from the system, the question of the participation of the Israeli Arabs was truly at the centre of the electoral campaign. This is a disturbing phenomenon, so much so that President Shimon Peres was obliged to bring up some evident facts: '*The Israeli Arabs are citizens with the same rights in Israel (…) All residents, without regard to their nationality, sex and age have the same rights and responsibilities. That is the essence of democracy.*'[2]

An overview of the main parties and the results (tentative)

a. Kadima

Contrary to what the polls predicted just two weeks ago, it was, in the end, Kadima, the party formed by Ariel Sharon in 2005, that won the legislative elections, with **28 seats** (one seat ahead of Likud). That is a weak lead, to be sure, but nonetheless a personal victory for Tzipi Livni, who succeeded these past several days in making up the gap separating her from her rival, Benjamin Netanyahu. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was strongly criticised during the campaign, was able to count on the support of a young and female electorate. The centrist party also managed to collect a goodly number of undecided voters from the Centre Left, because Tzipi Livni represented for them the best way to stop Benjamin Netanyahu.

The electoral platform of Kadima includes the return of territory in exchange for peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state while maintaining Jerusalem as the unified capital of Israel. The centrist party also intends to reach a peace agreement with the neighboring states with a view to establishing permanent borders.

b. Likud

Likud has made an exceptional breakthrough: with **27 seats,** it more than doubled its present number of seats (12). This result may be explained by an effectively run campaign focused on the security question and the economy with the slogan: '*Strong on security, strong on the economy.*' Moreover, a great many voters who voted for Ariel Sharon in the last elections preferred to take their votes back to Likud. However, the party did not succeed in achieving its promise to become the number one party, and this defeat can be attributed in part to the fact that the programme of Israel Beitenu, which is markedly further on the Right, attracted a goodly number of voters from Likud. But the setback is also linked to the controversial personality of Benjamin Netanyahou.

The leader of Likud promised to stop the threat of Hamas and to prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear bomb. Like Avigdor Liberman, he believes that there is no partner for peace on the Palestinian side and he therefore recommends an 'economic peace.' The dismantling of unapproved settlements, the right of return of the Palestinians and the status of Jerusalem

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[2] Haaretz, 9 February 2009

are among the key issues for relaunching the peace process which he does not want to discuss. He is still more opposed to continuing the dialogue with the Syrians.

c. Israel Beitenou

The nationalist party of Avigdor Liberman has, unquestionably, succeeded in weighing on the campaign by setting the political agenda even if its score (**15 seats**) is less than what the final polls were predicting (18-19 seats). As the number three political force in the country, it is now the party that will be most courted by those seeking to form the future government.

Ferociously opposed to any exchange of land for peace, Avigdor Liberman has been able to develop a muscular message directed not only at the Palestinians and the Arab world but also vis-à-vis the Israeli Arabs. The latter have often been presented by Liberman as being only mildly loyal or disloyal to Israel. Israel Beitenou is in favour of a peace agreement with the Palestinians on condition that the Israeli Arab population be transferred to a future Palestinian state! The nationalist party recommends civil marriage and other laic advances with respect to Jewish traditions and Zionism.

d. Ha'avoda (Labour)

The score of the Labour party is at an all-time low (**13 seats**), and this is a personal defeat for Ehud Barak, who was unable to position himself as a future Prime Minister versus his two rivals. The present Minister of Defence was still less successful in taking advantage during the electoral campaign of his good management of the war against Hamas. The question is now to know whether the leader of Ha'avoda (the fourth party) will still have enough legitimacy and support to continue to lead the party.

The party of Ehud Barak is in favour of continuing the negotiations with the Palestinians with a view to reaching a peace agreement and the establishment of a Palestinian state. The Labour party is the one to make the greatest concessions, since it is, under certain conditions, ready to authorise Palestinian sovereignty over many Palestinian districts of East Jerusalem and the establishment of the capital of the future Palestinian in East Jerusalem.

e. Shas

Shas keeps its place (**11 seats**), and is just one seat down compared to the preceding elections. The party lost ground within its electorate on the Right, part of which preferred to vote for Likud and Israel Beitenu. The ultra-Orthodox party is opposed to the return of territory.

What are the scenarios for the future Israeli government?

a. A government formed by Kadima

It should be recalled that following the resignation of Ehud Olmert, Tzipi Livni was unable to form a government coalition at the end of last October to allow the legislative terms to run to completion. One day after the latest vote, that task does not look any easier than it was for several months; indeed the contrary is true! On the evening following the elections, bouyed by her score, she announced with confidence that she would be the future Prime Minister: '*Security is not just the concern of the Right; peace is not just the concern of the Left,*' she insisted. '*Nothing can prevent the will of the people of Israel from being implemented. The voters have chosen Kadima, we have their confidence and we will form a government of unity.*' [3] A government, yes, but how?

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[3] Israeli TV Channel 2

A Kadima-Likoud-Labour coalition (national unity). Such a scenario would bring together 71 seats out of 120 but today seems impossible given that Benjamin Netanyahu is demanding the post of Prime Minister and intends to consider on a priority basis a government of the Right.

Kadima-Labour-Israel Beitenu. This improbable scenario would in any event not collect enough seats to form a government. Indeed, by joining with Liberman, notably by offering to the nationalist party its support for civil marriages and reform of the electoral system, Tzipi Livni would see her chances of rallying Meretz and the Arab parties evaporate since the latter would never support participating in a coalition that included Liberman. However the case may be, Tzipi Livni refused during the campaign to make any alliance whatsoever with the Arab parties.

A coalition with the Shas party also seems to be excluded given that Tzipi Livni cut her lines of communication to the ultra-Orthodox party. Our tentative conclusion is that the task of forming a coalition would be difficult if not impossible for Madame Livni.

b. A government formed by Likud

During the campaign, Benjamin Netanyahu did not conceal his intention to form a coalition of the Right, a 'nationalist camp' comprising **Likud-Israel Beitenu-Shas and the 3 other small parties of the right** (United Torah Judaism, Jewish Home, National Union). Such a coalition would hold 65 seats in the Knesset but in such a scenario, the religious parties would have to come to terms with certain laic projects of Avigdor Liberman. This is a difficult task, since we know that the spiritual leader of Shas has said that those who were voting for Liberman: '*would be giving power to the devil*' and that it was '*absolutely forbidden*' to vote for a party which: '*approves of stores which sell pork and which approves of civil marriages.*'[4] The nationalist party, for its part claims to be 'Kosher' and assures voters that its proposals (notably on civil marriage) have received the backing of many Orthodox rabbis.[5] If Benjamin Netanyahu can in the coming days enjoy the favour of the nationalist and religious parties, then there almost no doubt that he will be named by Shimon Peres to form the government.

A **Likud-Israel Beitenu-Labour-Shas** coalition is another plausible scenario which would probably see the nomination of Ehud Barak as Minister of Defense. If the alliance between Likud and Israel Beitenu seems logical, it is no less the case that Benjamin Netanyahu is not at all ready to cede this strategic post to Avigdor Liberman.

Finally, a government of national unity: a **Likud-Kadima-Labour** coalition theoretically remains possible on condition that Tzipi Livni agrees to join a government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. This is a scenario that would appear to be rather unlikely considering her most recent statements.

By way of conclusion

Despite the provisional victory of the centrist party, Israel is turning to the Right (with 65 deputies out of 120). The excellent score of Likud and the good score of the nationalist party are signals which clearly indicate that a major segment of Israelis is expecting greater 'security' and is less disposed to compromises. Logically, the good score of the Kadima party shows that the other half of Israelis wants to keep the door to negotiations with the Palestinians open. Whatever the coalition may look like, one thing is relatively

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[4] Haaretz, 9 February 2009.
[5] « *Israel Beitenu defends platform as perfectly 'kosher'* », Jerusalem Post, 8 February 2009.

certain: without the support of the nationalist party it is almost impossible to envisage the formation of a government! Israel is at a crossroads between, on the one hand, a relatively intransigent security policy led by a coalition of the Right (and the extreme Right) and, on the other hand, a security policy that is more pragmatic coupled with a continuation of negotiations with the Palestinians which would be led by a coalition 'of the Left.' Negotiations will be continuing in the coming days, but the alliances of yesterday and of today will perhaps no longer valid tomorrow. From now on, one may probably expect several sudden developments. Will there perhaps be a government of national unity?