The Israeli Elections: The Alternation of Personalities and the Fixation of Policies

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The results of the recent Israeli elections elicited a broad debate on several topics concerning the relationship between the expectations and course of the elections on the one hand, and the political and partisan results and assembly of the coalition government on the other.

Current broadcasts from a variety of Israeli media convey an atmosphere of satisfaction and tranquility, with promises about the ability of the center parties—as they are referred to—to restore the “necessary” balance to the political, economic, and social reality in Israel. Many citizens have come to believe these promises stem from the changes in the number of seats won by each party, especially the success of the Yesh Atid (meaning “there is a future”) party in obtaining 19 seats, ensuring the party significant influence on policy development affecting all aspects of Israeli life. Many consider that this party's success charted a new “exchange” in Israeli political deliberations. Yesh Atid doubled its strength through an agreement with the Habayet Hayehudi (Jewish Home) party, and used this agreement—manifested in clarity, transparency, and no concessions on basic principles—to weaken the Likud-Beiteinu coalition’s ability to exert domineering pressure during the formation of the government coalition.

Although I am among those who claim the election results could ostensibly reflect a sort of “intuitive rationality,” I would like to cast a degree of doubt onto this reading as described above. Specific sectors of society deliberately and intentionally transferred their votes to new party forces, thus expressing their utter dissatisfaction with the Likud–Yisrael Beiteinu–Shas government that extended from 2009–2013. This election possessed features of intra-societal movements, most significantly, the increased involvement of a significant number of citizens from prosperous economic backgrounds with a predominantly secular vision, Western cultural background (i.e., Ashkenazi), and residence in the large cities in the center of Israel. This group spearheaded the elections in order to defend their interests and express their disapproval of the previous government coalition’s transfer of an enormous amount of resources from the working sectors in Israeli society to sectors that do not contribute to the so-called, “national burden,” which encompasses military service and participation in the labor market. They also wanted to express their resentment...
towards the deterioration of Israel's foreign relations as a result of fanatic nationalist policy pursued by the Haredim (Ultra-Orthodox) parties, the Yisrael Beiteinu party, and large segments of the Likud party itself.

This analysis challenges an important argument rooted in Israeli political sociology, as expressed by Baruch Kimmerling when he stated that the political impact of the old secular Ashkenazi elite—who embraced the national socialist ideology to serve their interests and take control of the state’s power centers—has disappeared. Contrary to Kimmerling’s claim, I maintain that this elite still plays a strong political, cultural, and economic role and, in reality, the only thing that has changed is their pragmatic ideology, which began to follow a national global-capitalist model and support “wise” diplomatic positions that would ensure their continued integration and expand their influence in the global economy.

This elite exploited the middle class’s overwhelming dissatisfaction as expressed through the mass movement and social protests in the summer of 2011. However, it is striking that the party that succeeded in harnessing support from members of the social movement does not differ in its economic and social policies from the prevailing vision of the Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu parties, who led the coalition government against which hundreds of thousands of citizens protested.

The success of the Yesh Atid party signified an additionally important political characteristic that was reflected in the party’s coalition with the Jewish Home party, led by Naftali Bennett. Lapid launched his electoral campaign in the city of Ariel, the settlement stronghold in the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, and then, coalescing with Bennett, expressed the broad consensus that the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories are integral to the identity of the Jewish state. The coalition between Lapid and Bennett demonstrates the looseness that has developed in the understanding of the term “centrist parties.” This terminological ambiguity is due to the lack of any noticeable differences between these parties and the right-wing parties on all aspects of strategic and ideological visions for the borders of the Jewish state, resolutions for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Jewish identity of the state, and the dominance of national neoliberalism in the powers of government. Despite the perceptible differences between the supporters of both parties in regards to degree of religiosity, there is, it seems, a clear consensus on national interests. These interests revolve around domestic issues; solving housing and cost of living problems; corruption; poverty; refraining from taking controversial security, strategic or political positions; and claiming that the ongoing transitions in the region and the “Arab Spring” obliges maintaining the status quo, all while taking into account the need to exert a special effort to change Israel’s image in the world and improve its foreign relations.
The voting patterns in the recent elections demonstrate the limits of the legitimacy of the Israeli political system. They were revealed by the exclusion of two societal sectors from participating in the coalition that combined constitute nearly a third of the citizens of Israel; the Arabs and the Haredi Jews. In spite of the core differences between them in terms of national affiliations, extent of religiosity, and participation in the Israeli labor market, the political strategy undertaken by the Lapid–Bennett coalition, which centered on so-called “burden-sharing,” dealt with both sectors on the same premise. More importantly, Arab citizens were completely excluded from the development of the government coalition, as has been the case historically. During dialogue with the Haredi parties, Yair Lapid expressed his disregard for the Arab citizens with a racist statement saying that he did not intend to establish a coalition with Knesset members he labeled as “Zoabis.” Despite later withdrawing from using this expression, Lapid’s position coincided with those of the other parties that would join the coalition government; none suggested any potential change in policies concerning the Palestinian minority in Israel such as those of subjugation; marginalization; cultural and political repression; community disintegration; and restrictions on Arab towns enforced through policies of land confiscation, obstruction of development, and denial of adequate planning.

The aforementioned analyses indicate that what has changed in these elections are the personalities and not the attitudes and policies of parties. The arrival of Yair Lapid, a good-looking journalist, and his party into the political arena, with the added success of Naftali Bennett, constitute a qualitative leap in earning the love of Jewish Israeli society. Bennett represents personal success, buttressed by his achievements as a globalized hi-tech man, radiated through his articulation of a combination of national–religious ideological beliefs and support for the settlements. But these qualities do not ensure any radical shift regarding fundamental issues discussed in the political arena.

True, we are talking about persons who subdued Netanyahu’s political image and exceeded his media appeal, bringing a promising message of hope for a better future for Israeli society. And it is true that we are talking about new personalities arriving in the Israeli Knesset—forty-seven new MKs, many of whom do not have any experience whatsoever in politics and are therefore not committed to the existing power structures or connected to economic and political interests. It is also true that we are talking about the introduction of new political recruitment mechanisms and direct channels of communication with the public through social media. However, in spite of all this novelty, it seems that the governing coalition reflects a vast difference between discourse and promises and the policies on the ground. An in-depth look at the new government’s outlined scheme reveals national strategic policies of a neoliberal globalized nature, Western condescending racist trends, policies of eradicating
organized labor, and the weakening of welfare services will continue to remain dominant in the formation of policy and decision-making processes.

It seems that due to the dominance of fanatical ideological personalities in the current coalition, the government will be unwilling to take on new positions relating to settlements and the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in light of the affirmed consensus considering settlements as integral to the identity of the Jewish state. It also seems this coalition will not hasten to support the vulnerable sectors of society; the economic plan being discussed in order to approve the state budget for the next two years is based on reducing government aid to the most vulnerable sectors of society and on raising taxes without making any clear changes to the tax breaks for big companies and influential capital. Moreover, it appears that the racist exclusion of anyone who does not belong to the dominant cultural identity—represented by its Ashkenazi, neoliberal and nationalistic conservatism—from the advantages of a democratic society will continue and expand to include the Arabs, some Sephardic Jews who live on the periphery of Israeli society, and the Haredim, who insist on maintaining their narrow-minded attitude towards the outside world.

Therefore, based on this, the “soft” discourse uttered by Yair Lapid and his group, and the “fraternal” discourse of Naftali Bennett are only attractive guises designed to conceal the policies that remain hostage to the dominant political paradigm embodied in the arrogant, nationalist, neo-liberal conservative persona of the Prime Minister, Benyamin Netanyahu. The absence of any substantive threat to his forming the government and assuming the position of prime minister is nothing but a conclusive indication that the Israeli public recognizes him as the best representative for their interests, despite some pressure from segments of the public to introduce minor amendments to his policies through their support of Lapid and Bennett. Before concluding, it is important to clarify that the amendments introduced by Lapid and Bennett negate each other, thereby maintaining apparent moderateness for the benefit of propaganda objectives which conceal their substantive consensus on the main issues.

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