

## The Recent Israeli Elections, the Israeli Left and their Ramifications: An Analysis

by Uri Zaki

I will begin with the bottom line first: January's Israeli national elections were a major blow for Prime Minister Netanyahu. Indeed, Netanyahu will form Israel's next government as well, but he will be much weaker politically and publically than in the former coalition. Despite the fact that the Left has not won the elections, they did set the ground for a significant growth of this camp towards the next national elections in four years or less. In this piece I will first analyze the reasons for Netanyahu and the Right's weakening, than I will analyze the different players in the Center-Left and finally, I will suggest an outlook on how the Israeli Left can emerge victorious in the next elections.

The undercurrents that led to this result could be found in the big social protest of the summer of 2011. The conventional wisdom was that the social protest was broken politically and will not have a significant effect on the elections. Yet, the frustration of the Israeli middle-class that erupted that summer was the same one that drew away from Netanyahu, and also increased the number of voters in the big Israeli coastal cities – the strong-hold of the Israeli middle-class. The Israeli middle-class message to Netanyahu was that they do not share the ideological basis of his outgoing coalition, and that they want a new set of priorities. Netanyahu's term was focused on the following elements: a defiant position vis a' vis the world on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the development of the settlement enterprise; Prevention – even without coordination with the US – of an Iranian nuclear weapon; an attack on the Left, the Israeli-Palestinian citizens, the judiciary and other democratic institutions; an alliance with the Ultra-Orthodox community; An emphasis on Israel's macro-economic standing, despite the world economic crisis.



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The post-social protest Israeli Middle Class did not share this set of priorities: Israelis could not be happy about the macro-economy while the cost of living was constantly rising while social services were gradually disappearing ; They did not like the alliance with the Ultra Orthodox community that is exempt from the military service on the one hand and does not join the work force on the other hand – heavily relied on government subsidies without sharing the burden of neither taxes nor service; They wanted Israel to remain a member of the Western democratic world – not one that is engaged on attacks on democratic institutions, ethnic minorities or political rivals, and certainly not one that jeopardizes Israel's most important alliance with the United States, whose re-elected President showed his discontent with Netanyahu and his positions (after the latter supported almost bluntly the Republican contender in the US elections of 2012).

### The Right

In all the polls prior to the elections the Rightist coalition – based on the Rightist parties together with the two Ultra-Orthodox religious parties, was leading 66-54 on the Center-Left bloc. Yet, The actual results were a de-facto tie between the two blocs.

The most important event in the election cycle occurred two months prior to the elections: in November 2012 PM Netanyahu and Foreign minister Lieberman announced a unification of their two respective parties – the Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu – into one joint list in the upcoming elections. It was reported that this joint list, that together had 42 seats in the last Knesset, is expecting to increase its representation in at least ten percent. In failed to do so. The joint list ended up getting 31 seats – losing over 25% of its seats. Yet, the real reasoning for the unification was to leave Netanyahu as the sole candidate for Prime Minister, and prevent potential threats – namely former PM Ehud Olmert – to join the race, as it put Netanyahu as the leader of the biggest party, that no other one could threaten. Yet, this one-candidate-election was also one of the sources of Netanyahu's loss. A new rightwing force – Naftali Benet and his Jewish Home party. Benet was elected only few months before the elections in dramatic primary election in the National Religious party in which he portrayed himself as the new religious right - a young successful high-tech exit millionaire, who as much as he cares about the settlements also brings hope to the young middle class. He was basically saying: Netanyahu is bound to be the next PM. By voting to us you ensure all these values that me and my party stand for – a kind of high-tech right.. Soon, the joint Likud-Beitenu list was beginning to rapidly lose support to the Benet list in the polls. That triggered a scare campaign by the Likud, portraying Benet's list as an extremist one. The Likud leaked a video clip to the Israeli TV channel 2, in which number 13 on the Benet list is speaking in the US about the need to blow up the Masque on the Temple Mount/Haram Al Sharif in Jerusalem. The campaign was effective yet it did not result in the Likud desired outcome – voters shifted from Benet's list to the Centrist one of Yair Lapid, who became the great winner of the election.

## The Center-Left

This bloc includes the parties that oppose Netanyahu. Nonetheless, it is not necessarily an ideological bloc (much like the Right is not solid ideologically). It consists of the traditional Left leaning parties: Labor and Meretz, the Center parties of Kadima, and two new parties – „the Movement“ led by former Kadima leader Zipi Livni and „Yesh Atid“ led by former TV show host and columnist Yair Lapid. The third component is the Arab parties – Hadash – a communist party which is the only one that has an active Jewish group, the Islamic list and a nationalistic-secular list (Balad).

In early 2012 the Labor party elected former TV show host and outspoken journalist Shelly Yechimovich as the Chairwoman of the party. Her election rejuvenated the party. She brought back to the forefront of the Israeli political arena such ideals as Social-Democracy and social justice. Many of the young leaders and activists of the 2011 social protest joined the Labor party as a consequence. Yet, since her election Yechimovich decided to put all of the party's messaging on social issues, distancing it from political issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She was quoted saying that „it will be a historical distortion to call the Labor party „Left““. She had positive comments towards the settlers and took pride that the Labor party started the settlement enterprise. She was also actively working against the election of Peace Now's Executive Director Yariv Oppenheimer, as if not to stain the party with a peace activist face. It seems that her strategy was to capture right-leaning voters who are hawks on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but strongly oppose Netanyahu's social-economical neo-liberal policies. Yechimovich started the election cycle with a strong standing as the second biggest party in the polls, with a result of over 20 seats. She ended up with only 15 seats – the La-

bor party's second worst result in history. It seems that different reasons led to this poor performance, some of them have to do with the Chairwoman's personality, but I would name three reasons that I believe were the main ones:

1. Yechimovich failed to unite the Center-Left behind her, and namely to have Zippi Livni, the former leader of Kadima to join her party. This was a necessary step to counter the union of the Likud and Liebreman's party in the Right.
2. By going against the message of peace which was a major pillar in the Labor party's narrative since the 70s and certainly since the 90s (even if it was many times just a lip service), Yechimovich was acting against the electoral base of the party, which in reaction was looking for a new political home, mainly within Meretz.
3. Yechimovich had a mixed message on what she is trying to achieve – whether to join Netanyahu after the elections or to be an alternative to his leadership and a candidate to the PM office. At the beginning of the cycle she declared that saying that the Labor party will not join Netanyahu's coalition in advance will be „a complete political stupidity“. Then, less than a month later, when the Labor was losing support in the polls, she declared that the Labor party will not join Netanyahu under any circumstances. This was too late. At this stage nobody considered Yechimovich as a serious contender to the Premiership. On the other hand, those who wanted to moderate Netanyahu's coalition now had to switch their support to someone else – namely Yair Lapid's party, that wasn't shy about its plans to join the government.

## The Center Parties

In a somewhat unique phenomena of the Israeli parliamentary democracy, new parties emerge with each electoral cycle while others evaporate. In these elections two new parties emerged while one dramatically shrunk – Kadima, which for the last two elections was the biggest party in the Knesset, lost 26 of its 28 seats, and Barley crossed the threshold with just two seats. Its former chair, Zippi Livni, after a long dilemma decided to form a new party, „HaTnu'ah“ (=the Movement) which will put the peace process with the Palestinians as its main message. She was joined by two former chairmen of the Labor party (Amram Mitzna and Amir Peretz) and some other public figures. Livni tried to portray herself as a candidate to the position of Prime Minister, but no one took that seriously. It seems like her failure to join Yechimovich and the fact she was considered an unsuccessful head of the opposition prevented her from attracting many votes. Despite some flattering polls upon her announcement, she finished the election with 6 seats, and will most likely join Netanyahu with some degree of authority on the negotiations with the Palestinians.

The surprise of the election was „Yesh Atid“ – Yair Lapid's party. Lapid is a former popular TV show host and a columnist. He is also the son of Tommy Lapid – himself a once journalist and media executive turned politician, who led the Shinuy party, that lasted for two terms, and following an impressive achievement of 15 seats in the 2003 elections, evaporated all together by 2006.

Lapid is considered and portrayed himself like the dream-boy of the Israeli middle class. Handsome, successful, opinionated but not „an extremist“ – he doesn't trust the Palestinians, but he is for a peace process and concessions; He is for evacuating settle-

ments – but just the isolated ones; He is for another distribution of the country's wealth but he is by no means a socialist..

His main message in the elections was „where is the money?“ – trying to relate to the middle-class dominant sentiment since the social protest. Another main flag was „the shared burden“ – the fact that Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews are exempt from military service and therefore are not allowed to work, leaving them outside the work market, and not contributing taxes, while heavily depending on government welfare. Much like his father who won his electoral achievement based on this sentiment Lapid declared that he will make this historical distortion end once and for all (of course, if he will insist on actually drafting Haredi Jews – something that will never happen, it might well be that even Tommy Lapid's grandson will be elected on the same message...).

Lapid formed a party without any democratically elected institutions. His party's bylaws state that he will be the chair of the party for 10 years, and that he will choose his party's list of candidates. It should be said, that the list he in fact chose is a very good one, which will bring 19 very talented people to the elected Knesset – a blessing after the last term which had some of the worst human material in Israel's history, in parties like the Likud, Yisrael Beitenu, Kadima and the National Union – all of them lost significant representation in this Knesset.

Lapid – who never hid his desire to enter Netanyahu's government – enjoyed in many ways the internal fight in the Right. Netanyahu and the Likud, fearing from losing seats to Benet's party, portrayed the latter as an extremist. Many moderate rightwing voters bought that message, but instead of going back to the Likud they went to Lapid – a better representative of moderation than

Netanyahu. Lapid also enjoyed support from Labor, Livni, and even Meretz potential voters who feared another extremist rightwing coalition. Thus, in the last 3 days of the campaign, in which, according to the Israeli law, polls are not allowed to be published, Lapid jumped from 12-13 seats to the actual 19 seats his party got. As I'm writing this piece it is still not clear whether and in what position will Lapid join the Netanyahu government. At least publically it seems like Lapid is trying to push the Haredi parties outside the coalition and to have a coalition based on Likud-Benet's party and his own. Such a coalition goes hand in hand with the sentiment of his voters and its main mission is supposed to be a change in the status of the Haredi community and its exemption from military service. On the other hand, if there is a genuine will to promote negotiations with the Palestinians – Benet will be an obstacle to that (although, I believe that Netanyahu himself is the biggest impediment to a significant agreement. Like in the past, he uses his partners in the Right as another pretext of avoiding progress). Netanyahu himself is pushing for a grad-coalition that will include all the „Center parties“, Benet's party and the Haredi party – and by doing that, neither one of its components can topple him.

### Meretz

Meretz started the campaign in a very weak position. In the last elections Meretz hit a record low of three seats, and the fear was it might even not cross the threshold. In 2012 Meretz elected Zehava Galon as chairwoman of the party. Galon, the founding executive director of the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem and a member of Knesset since 1999, is known to be one of the champions of human rights and an outspoken voice against military attacks. She was a lone voice against the war in Lebanon in 2006 and operation Cast Lead in Gaza

in 2008-9. She is also known for leading feminist campaigns, legislation against human trafficking and other civil and human rights issues. In theory, her election goes against the common knowledge of putting the less extremist figure as the face of the party, in order to not lose potential supporters. Yet, in this case, Galon's election proved the best choice for Meretz: as an ideological party, Meretz's reason d'être is to be an avant guard and a clear Lefty voice. Galon revived Meretz's position as an ideological lighthouse. Meretz's achievements in legislation in the Knesset and the fact that it was leading in all the new Knesset-Watch groups that formed after the social protest in 2011 – in social legislation, environmental legislation, etc. – helped to position Meretz as a party of hard-working legislators, who promote a social-democratic agenda.

After Yechimovich and the Labor party gave up on the „Left“ label, and about the flag of peace with the Palestinians, Meretz enjoyed the status of the only self-declared Left party within the Zionist parties. The Left of Israel, became the tagline of the party, which now attracted many disappointed Labor party voters who did not want to give up on the peace message, and who did not like the Labor's self-definition as non-Left. Meretz ended the election with twice the representation than the last elections – with six Members of Knesset. For the first time since its creation, half of the list were new Members.

## What's next?

The January 2013 elections proved that unlike the common wisdom, the Israeli Right is not bound to rule due to demographic or nationalistic reasons. In fact, it is most likely that if the Center-Left would have put an agreed upon candidate he or she would have won the election.

It is also clear that Social-Democratic agenda is relevant in Israel. The social protest that was seemed to have been crashed politically is still very much present in the voting tendencies of the Israeli middle-class.

The agenda of the outgoing Netanyahu coalition – macro-economic approach with weakening of the welfare state; attacks on the Israeli Left, Israeli Palestinians and democratic institutions; Defiance of the world and promotion of the settlement enterprise were all proven to be unpopular amongst Israelis.

For Europe, the US and the world, the biggest threat is falling into the trap of a Peace Process, instead of a Peace Deal. Since the elections Netanyahu started talking about a re-ignition of the peace process – a word that wasn't mentioned once during the campaign. He is doing so both out of political reasons – to lower the price of Lapid and the other centrist parties into his coalition, and because he understands that for President Obama and the new US Secretary of State Kerry (who both will visit Israel and Ramallah in the next two months), and Europe, the election results created a renewed desire for progress. Nonetheless, any Netanyahu coalition cannot be counted upon as a pro-active pusher for a permanent status agreement. True, Yair Lapid and Zipi Livni will pay the necessary lip service, but for the former this is not the top of the agenda and the latter is too weak.

On the other hand, a strong American led international initiative will find support within the Israeli public, which emerged as an important player in these elections. There is a need to talk to the Israeli public above the head of Netanyahu and other politicians.

They will follow the public, or will be ousted, exactly as the reluctant PM Shamir was in 1992, and Netanyahu himself in 1999, both facing pressure from American led effort to promote peace, and both choosing the settlements over it.

In that sense, it is important that Europe and Germany in particular, will continue its independent line, like in the case of the UN vote on Palestinian statehood last November. The Israeli public definitely read the message, and did not buy Netanyahu's line that all the world is against Israel. An independent European policy will also push the US administration to avoid „hands-off“ policy on this issue, like some in the President's circle are pushing for.

For the political Left itself, the next few years should be invested in translating the new political energies and awareness of the younger generation in Israel, ages 20-40, into political involvement. It seems like the Israeli middle-class is ripe to reclaim Israel that was pushed to the extreme in the last few decades.

The fact that the Labor party is not the second biggest party second time in a row creates a significant problem. In order to re-establish itself as the alternative to the Likud, it will have to rebuild itself as a party with a strong program both socially and politically, and namely, to have a candidate in a stature of Prime Minister.

For Meretz, the elections created a better position to become an even more significant force in the next elections. Much like Benet's party – an ideological small and old party that was revived by a massive enthusiastic joining of tens of thousands new members – a consequence of a strong grass-root work, Meretz can use its empowered position to become a strong political power, with a clear Lefty agenda and with a strong membership an involvement of activists across the country, who can rejuvenate the party. Such a position will also help in attracting votes from many in the Left who do not participate in the elections, and by doing so, also increase the overall size of the Center-Left bloc. ■