

Israel's Upcoming National Elections

Report No. 5

The First Round: Election of the Prime Minister

If all five candidates for prime minister continue to run, no decisive result is expected at the first round of voting despite evidence of Barak's widening lead during the last two weeks. Eight days before going to the polls (9 May), the electorate remains divided: Ehud Barak: 42%; Benjamin Netanyahu: 37%; Yitzchak Mordechai: 7%; Benny Begin and Azmi Bishara: 6% (jointly); Undecided: 8%.

צוות ההיגוי
מר חיים י. צדוק, יו"ר

ד"ר וינפריד וייט
ח"כ יהודה לנקרי
ח"כ יוסי ביילין

מר חיים הרצוג ז"ל,
יו"ר ראשון

בחסות:
קרן פרידריך אברט

Steering Committee
Mr. Haim J. Zadok,
Chairman

Dr. Winfried Veit
Yehuda Lankry, MK
Yossi Beilin, MK

The Late Mr. Chaim
Herzog, former
Chairman

Sponsor:
Friedrich Ebert
Stiftung

Mordechai has been put under pressure to withdraw unparalleled in the history of Israeli politics. However, based on his understanding of the direct election system, he believes that doing so would drive his supporters back to Netanyahu's fold. Hence, he refuses to withdraw. Barak's staff is divided as to whether the first or second round would favour their candidate. Some are convinced that if Mordechai allies himself with their camp, Barak will receive 53% of the vote (based on a recent survey). Others argue that Mordechai's withdrawal will set the stage for a repeat of the 1996 elections, when new immigrants and the ultra-orthodox turned to Netanyahu.

Mordechai is convinced that in order to achieve his goals — a change of government and the election of Center Party members to the Knesset — it would be foolhardy to withdraw at this stage. In light of the Center Party's declining popularity (recent surveys indicate that not more than eight of the anticipated 15 Knesset seats will be won), the party's leadership is rent as to the preferred policy. However, in order to participate in the next government, the Center Party must ensure the election of a prime minister with whom they can share the reins of power. If they are unable to capture a sufficient number of Knesset seats, for whatever reason, their bargaining power will be substantially reduced. To avoid this situation, some advocate reaching a binding agreement with Barak prior to the election.

Voting Patterns Among the Undecided Voters

Experience has taught us that the majority of undecided voters ultimately cast their votes for the right. Demographically, they belong to the Russian, ultra-orthodox, or Arab Israeli communities. Pollsters find it difficult to penetrate these groups, which means that significant gaps arise between survey results and election outcomes.

Only one-fourth to one-third of this group votes left, a fact that enabled the right to win every election as of 1977 (excluding the 1992 election, when Yitzhak Rabin (Labour) was elected) despite indications of the left's ascendancy. However, the trend is changing. Pollsters have found that undecided voters are equally divided, with a slight drift toward Barak. This group's behaviour is decisive for they make their choices very close to election day. Translated into numbers, this means that only 4% of the electorate, which equal about half of the undecided vote, needs to be swayed toward Barak in order for him to triumph. Consequently, these voters will be the focus of electioneering during the last week of the campaign.

Although four issues lie at the heart of the current election campaign, undecided voters tend to support a candidate exclusively by his position on the territorial solutions offered the Palestinians and the Syrians. Consequently, despite the fact that Netanyahu's position is inferior to that of 1996, he continues to quite successfully create the impression that he has resolutely acted to prevent the transfer of territory and that his policies have averted terrorist attacks. In the 1996 elections, he skilfully managed to transmit a contradictory portrait himself, aimed at two different political segments. On the one hand, he promised to continue the process begun in Oslo; on the other, he asserted that he was more capable than his opponents of retaining Israeli land. Although the trend has overturned with respect to the undecided voters, who are veering toward Barak, Netanyahu is still perceived as the stauncher warrior against terrorism. Although his identification with the right and the religious factions has become more explicit, his campaign continues to aimed at permitting the center-right voter to enjoy the best of both worlds: the desire for peace coupled with the reluctance to pay its cost in territorial concessions. This position has jostled undecided Likud voters between their emotional attachment to the party and their more moderate political positions.

The Arab Vote

About 20% of the audience attending regularly to the campaign broadcasts are Arab Israelis. They are forced to watch or hear Barak presented as "Mr. Security" in an attempt to attract the center and rightist vote. However, Arab Israelis would prefer to see Barak presented as "Mr. Equality".

In order to attract Arab Israelis (11% of the total electorate), who represent the only sector capable of balancing the ultra-orthodox and Russian immigrant votes that will go to Netanyahu in the second round, Barak requires an approach antithetical to that directed toward the general public. Here, Barak must clearly differentiate

himself from Netanyahu, especially regarding his commitment to the peace process. In the 1996 elections, Arab Israelis demonstrated, by means of blank ballots, that they would not be taken for granted. They demand to be treated as legitimate partners whose support is to be sought. Hence, while One Israel's leadership — Yossi Beilin, Shimon Peres, Shlomo Ben-Ami, Haim Ramon, Uzi Bar-Am and others — are deterred from articulating their leftist positions in the Israeli media, they are employed on a massive basis in direct contacts with Arab Israelis and in the Arabic press.

The Battle for the Russian Vote

The battle for the Russian vote (14% of the electorate) is the most crucial one waged in this campaign. As election day approaches, Barak's support is rising among these voters: from 19% at the outset of the campaign to 40% at present. For this reason, Natan Sharansky, the head of the Yisrael b'Aliya party, is being diligently courted by the two major candidates. The call to battle is being punctuated by the party's demand to receive the Ministry of the Interior¹ post — in place of Shas — in the next government, a demand that has touched a raw nerve in Israeli society.

For several years surveys have shown that the friction between the secular and the observant segments of Israeli society is the "hottest item" in the public discourse. But before the 1999 campaign, no one dared to focus upon it. Tomi Lapid, a new entrant into politics and head of the Shinuy party, has built his anti-religious platform around this issue. After May 17, a coalition might be constructed with One Israel, Meretz, the Center Party, Shinuy, and Yisrael b'Aliya, all of which are secular in character. Therefore, these divisions will have serious consequences for the winning candidate's ability to form a government,

Ehud Barak, whose obligations to Shas and to Arie Dery fall below those of Netanyahu, has declared that he may appoint Sharansky as Minister of the Interior as a ploy to obtain the Russian vote. In the 1992, these voters were responsible for Rabin's victory; in 1996, they helped Netanyahu come to power. Nevertheless, many undecided voters can be found among this sector, which has forced a significant portion of electioneering efforts to be directed toward them.

¹ The Ministry of Interior is responsible for determining the civil and personal status of new immigrants. It has placed many obstacles, based on meeting strict religious criteria as defined by the ultra-orthodox Shas movement, before the generally secular immigrants coming from the former USSR.