

Battered and bruised, Israelis look to bread-and-butter issues

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The Sydney Morning Herald

30 March 2006

P.13

This week's Israeli elections saw a vote, in effect, for a double disengagement. Ehud Olmert's Kadima party won the largest share of the electoral spoils and endorsement of its platform to continue Israel's physical disengagement from Palestinian population centres. But the strong showing of parties that had focused their campaigns on socio-economic issues underlined that Israelis also seem to want an intellectual disengagement from the Israeli-Palestinian issue and a refocusing of priorities on bread and butter issues closer to home.

Kadima's victory was not surprising, though it did not do as well as was expected or as it hoped. Its 28 seats in the 120-seat legislature was a respectable showing in Israel's highly fragmented political system. But it was far less than the 40-odd seats that polls had predicted the party would win when the former prime minister Ariel Sharon took the momentous decision to bolt from the Likud party and form Kadima.

In part, those initial predictions were wildly optimistic. In part, too, Kadima suffered from the loss of its founder to a stroke in January; Sharon still lies in a coma in a Jerusalem hospital.

The result will make coalition negotiations more difficult for Olmert and his eventual government will be a lot less stable. But even if the coming weeks of feint, manoeuvre, tantrum, reconciliation and horse-trading don't produce a coalition totally unified behind Olmert's proposal for further withdrawals from settlements on the West Bank, there are now enough centre-left votes in the Knesset to put his plan into action.

By contrast the right-wing vote in Israel did not so much collapse as scatter. In fact, the outcome was less a disaster for the right in general than it was for one right-wing leader in particular, the former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Under his leadership the Likud party shrank from 38 seats to 11. This was partly a result of the Kadima split, but it was also much worse than pre-election polls had predicted.

Other right-wing leaders - notably Israel Beitenu's Avigdor Lieberman - did much better than expected. Lieberman, who built his election success on support from Israel's Russian community, can now lay genuine claim to leadership of the right-wing nationalist camp in parliament. Meanwhile, there will be months of soul-searching ahead for a Likud party looking for a new direction, new ideas and, probably, a new leader.

If there was a surprise in this election it was the extent to which parties that campaigned on socio-economic issues did well. Labour, under ex-trade union head Amir Peretz, received the second-largest share of the vote and won 20 seats - one better than in the last election but still a little below expectations. Shas, a party that has always been firmly focused on getting economic support for its ultra-orthodox Sephardic constituency, looks like being the third-largest party in the Knesset. But the real bolter was the hitherto largely unknown Pensioners Party headed by former Mossad spymaster Rafi Eitan. Better known as the man who captured Adolf Eichmann and who ran Israel's spy in the US Navy, Jonathan Pollard, Eitan campaigned on a platform of getting better support for Israel's increasingly large number of retirees. His party's seven seats will give him a significant role in coalition negotiations.

Many Israelis have become increasingly weary of the daily preoccupation of politicians with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while social and economic problems go unaddressed. This does not mean that they are no longer concerned about their security. In part, socio-economic issues were able to come to the fore because most Israelis had already made up their minds about how best to ensure their security, at least on the Palestinian front.

The sentiment shared by many Israelis is "let's put an end to this" by withdrawing isolated settlements from the West Bank, finishing the security fence and setting a border with the Palestinians. This was reflected in the limited role that Hamas's election victory in Palestinian legislative elections earlier this year seems to have had on the outcome of the Israeli poll.

Not so long ago Hamas's triumph would have been political manna from heaven for the Israeli right. As the victory of centre-left parties this week demonstrates, most Israelis would appear to view a Hamas-led Palestinian Authority as largely irrelevant.

One reason they do is that most believe Israel's next moves should be unilateral. Olmert has said publicly that a Kadima-led government would be prepared to begin negotiations with the Palestinians over future West Bank withdrawals. But the reality is that serious negotiations are a very unlikely prospect.

On the Palestinian side, the Fatah leader and Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, is willing to talk but lacks the authority to conduct and deliver on those negotiations.

Meanwhile, the newly elected Hamas Government has the authority to negotiate but is unwilling to do so. At the same time, Israelis are unwilling to allow the disengagement process to become hostage to the probable long search for an effective Palestinian negotiating partner. Nor would they be keen to give up the advantages of pursuing disengagement on their own terms.

Indeed, Hamas's victory in the elections in January, and the outcome of this week's Israeli poll, have shown that the theme of disengagement has become nothing if not mutual.

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