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The Israeli Elections

Why Kadima are winning

by Dr Emanuele Ottolenghi

Introduction

On March 28, Israelis will elect a new Knesset. This time, as often in the past, Israel's vote occurs at a critical moment in the nation's history.

In less than a year, Israel has successfully withdrawn from Gaza. That event precipitated a critical realignment in Israel's party system, triggered by Ariel Sharon's departure from the Likud and the launching of his new party, Kadima. While Labor hoped to fight Sharon's popularity by focusing on corruption and the economy, Sharon's stroke and Hamas' victory in the Palestinian elections have created an entirely new political scenario where security concerns and support for further unilateral actions are taking precedence.

As a result of these factors, Kadima is outperforming Labor in the polls. They are also outperforming the more hawkish Likud, despite the fact that the security threats from Hamas and Iran have become the nation's main concern. In most polls, large sections of the public appear to be turning their back on traditional parties and their platforms, embracing instead a centrist option epitomised by Sharon's unilateral quest for secure borders. Behind this goal, there lies a shift of historic proportions in the way Israelis define their political identity.

Hawkish Doves

In an essay written in 2002, Israeli academic Tamar Hermann defined Israelis as 'tactical hawks' and 'strategic doves'. Her findings, based on public attitudes towards issues of peace, war and security, shed important light on how the public would vote in 2003, an election where these issues would take centre stage. From the monthly polls she used for her analysis, an interesting picture emerged. Though overwhelmingly open to negotiation, dialogue and compromise with their Palestinian counterparts, positions usually associated with Labor, Israelis also expressed deep pessimism about the Palestinians' willingness to end violence and return to negotiations. Hence, there were high levels of support for the security policies adopted by Israel's National Unity Government under then Prime Minister Sharon, whilst at the same time as many as 70% embraced unilateral separation and territorial compromise as a political option.

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Superficially, this data seemed contradictory, but in Hermann's view, they were consistent. The post-Oslo reality blurred the traditional dividing lines between the dovish left and the hawkish right. Whilst many Israelis were becoming more willing to make concessions on territory, they were at the same time less confident in the vision of peaceful coexistence, which the Oslo process had failed to achieve. Paradoxically, this cost the left considerable support in electoral terms. Though an ever increasing number of Israelis embraced Labor's territorial policies, they became disillusioned with Israel's Palestinian partners, preferring to entrust right-wing leaders to carry out any concession.

The idea of unilateral separation, which Sharon eventually embraced with his Gaza disengagement plan, offered evidence of this change. Supported by both left and right, it commanded a similar, if not greater, majority of public support than the policy of seeking a negotiated two state solution. This was despite the fact that separation contradicted the traditional left-wing view that a deal should be negotiated and the right-wing view that separation would create unacceptable borders whilst rewarding violence. In the summer of 2002, polls were already suggesting that both left and right-leaning Israelis were merging towards the centre of the political spectrum. This trend continued after the 2003 elections.

The collapse of 'Left vs. Right'

This merger highlighted the blurring of previously entrenched divisions. For years Israel was divided by two conflicting visions. On the left was a vision which came to be encapsulated in the Oslo accords, based on the belief that a negotiated settlement leading to a peaceful coexistence was possible between Israel and the Palestinians. On the right was the 'Greater Israel' vision, based on the belief that Israel was entitled to retain East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, both for security reasons and in the name of Israel's historic rights. Sharon's opportunity was borne of the failure of both ideologies. The Oslo vision was discredited by the failure of Camp David in 2000 and Yasser Arafat's decision to incite another violent Intifada. With Palestinian violence aimed to extract further Israeli concessions, Palestinian terrorism and its goals persuaded most Israelis that a final negotiated settlement was unrealistic. The position of Israel's right, that the Palestinian leadership would not recognise the legitimacy of a Jewish state on portions of the ancestral land of Israel, appeared to be vindicated by the surge in violence.

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But discrediting Israel's left did nothing to revive Israel's right and its dream of a 'Greater Israel' – which mirrored the Palestinian dream of a Palestinian state in place of Israel. As violence intensified after 2000, everyone recognised that the status quo was untenable. The broad principle of partition, traditionally embraced by the left, was accepted by large sections of the hawkish right as the only way forward.

A key driving factor which supports the logic of partition, is the changing demographics. Most Israelis are aware that if Israel continues to control the territory captured in 1967, sooner or later, Israel's Jewish majority will become a minority in the area under Israeli control. They would be forced to either impose their rule by force or become a Jewish minority in an Arab state. Neither option is acceptable to most Israelis. But after years of violence, they doubt the credibility of the Palestinians as partners for peace.

The alternative grasped by Sharon was to divide the land unilaterally, until such time as a negotiated agreement would seem possible. Sharon was able to seize the moment because he identified this emerging moderate centre.

In Israel a new mood prevailed in support of Sharon's tough and unsentimental pragmatism. No political contender has been able to challenge the dominance of this approach, even after Sharon's incapacitation. Whilst the Israeli Labor party continues to favour a negotiated settlement, anarchy, chaos and the rise of a radical Islamist challenge among the Palestinians make it much harder for them to press their case with the Israeli electorate.

Sharon understood the tectonic shift, not only in the strategic environment in which Israel now found itself, but also in the public mood. Without a realistic chance for comprehensive peace in the near future and with Israel's internal divisions blurred by the reality of conflict, Sharon did not have to pursue, as his predecessors had, a balance between Israel's national interest and Palestinian aspirations. Instead he had the easier task of balancing Israel's diverging views of an ideal political settlement.

In the current campaign therefore, Kadima are floating proposals for unilateral withdrawal from more West Bank settlements. In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas victory however, Israelis may prefer to sit tight rather than take more unilateralism steps. It is possible that, over time, failure to make progress could reinforce Labor's call for negotiations, but this will only happen if a credible partner arises from the Palestinian camp.

Victory is in the Centre

In the 2003 election, the Likud owed its victory to more than its traditional electorate – an alliance of settlers, Sephardi Jews, development town residents, the underprivileged and more recent immigrants. Under Sharon's leadership, the Likud managed to conquer the centre, adding members of the middle classes, including urban, secular and educated elites to its supporters. The significant gains made by Likud in places like Haifa and Tel Aviv, traditional left-wing strongholds, reflected this new trend. Labor adopted a different strategy of keeping its core voters on the left. Though Sharon subsequently adopted two key Labor policies – unilateralism and the West Bank barrier – Labor was punished for its perceived inability to journey to the political centre.

In the current election, Labor has tried to win back both its traditional vote among the middle classes and make inroads into the less privileged sections of society, by stressing a socio-economic agenda aimed at redressing Israel's economic inequalities. So far, this approach has failed to lift Labor in the polls. Labor is not losing ground – a significant achievement given the haemorrhage of leaders such as Shimon Peres to Kadima – but it is unlikely to challenge Kadima.

Likud on the other hand, having won the centre ground in 2003, spent much of the past three years debating whether to keep the party there. They were divided over whether to embrace pragmatic policies including territorial withdrawals, or remain true to the party's traditional ideology.

With Israeli civilian casualties having soared, Sharon's firm stance on security was the Likud's main asset in their 2003 victory. However he failed in his struggle inside the Likud against the hard-core ideologues. His departure from Likud to establish Kadima, in November 2005, seemed to turn the upcoming elections into a referendum on Sharon and his policies.

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However, Sharon's sudden demise has not significantly reversed the rise of his party in the polls, despite the fact that Sharon's replacement, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, lost some personal support. The reason for Kadima's popularity is its policy, not its leaders.

Kadima's rise has been coupled with a decline in confidence in both traditional political blocs. The issue of corruption has damaged all. In 2003, nearly half the public viewed both Likud and Labour as equally corrupt. Since then, their status has not improved. But corruption has more to do with the identity of leaders than the nature of their policies. In the end it is policies that matter. It is the combination of disenchantment with the existing parties, the pressures of conflict and the longing for a new political agenda which have created a groundswell of support for a centrist party to fill the vacuum. Labor could still stir from its current crisis if it could recapture the political centre ground it controlled in years gone by. But in the short term, this is an unlikely development.

Conclusion

In the run up to polling day, it is clear that Israel's party system has undergone a major realignment. Kadima may yet prove itself a transient phenomenon, but the constituency it represents is there to stay. Sharon's personal popularity was not the whole story. His decision to abandon the Likud and establish a centrist party transcended his persona because it captured Israel's predominant mood.

Sharon's successors in the Kadima party now face the challenge of embracing his vision and implementing it. Labor has sought to regain a broad based electoral support by stressing its commitment to tackling neglected social inequalities inside Israel. But the lesson of Kadima's success is that if Labor is to revive electorally, it must find a way of inspiring confidence in its ability to ensure Israel's security at the same time.

Of course, the election itself is only the first part of the process of forming a government in Israel. Once the votes are counted, the coalition building will begin. A coalition based around Labor and Kadima, two parties which share a commitment to territorial compromise and partition, may well be on the cards. If that transpires, it will remain to be seen what influence Labor will be able to have over both security and social policies.

However, another scenario is also very possible. With Labor's support for territorial concessions virtually guaranteed, Kadima might prefer to form a coalition with Likud, knowing that this will avoid unnecessary tensions on economic policies while ensuring critical support in the Knesset were Israel to choose to withdraw from additional territory. The irony may be that as Labor's policies on territorial concessions becomes mainstream, it might fall to other parties to implement them.

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