

Political

update: Elections set for 10 February at Tzipi Livni's request - 30 October

Key points:

- Tzipi Livni requests early elections after refusing Shas' coalition demands
 - Opinion poll puts Livni's Kadima and Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud neck and neck
 - Labor are predicted to halve their seats in the Knesset
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Latest developments

- Speaker of the Israeli Knesset, Dalia Itzik, announced on Thursday (30 October) that a general election will be held on 10 February 2009. Kadima Chairwoman Tzipi Livni called for early elections on Sunday 26 October after abandoning her attempts to form a governing coalition. In response to her request, Israeli President Shimon Peres told the Knesset in its opening session on Monday (27 October) that there was no possibility of a coalition being formed.
- If Kadima wins the largest number of seats in the election, Livni will once again be tasked with forming a governing coalition. If successful she will become Israel's first female Prime Minister since Golda Meir resigned in 1974. Ehud Olmert (Kadima) will remain Prime Minister until a new Government is formed.
- Livni's coalition talks ended in deadlock due to her refusal to accommodate the demands of the ultra-orthodox Sephardic Shas Party. As a condition of its involvement in a coalition, the Shas Party had been demanding that Livni agree to "family payments" worth NIS 1 billion annually (£155 million) and that Jerusalem not be negotiated in any future peace deal with the Palestinians.
- In a statement on Monday, Livni said she was willing to make concessions but had to draw the line at "impossible" demands:

"When I had to decide between continued extortion and bringing forward elections, I preferred elections... When it became clear that everyone and every party was exploiting the opportunity to make demands that were economically and diplomatically illegitimate, I decided to call off [talks] and go to elections." (27/10/08)

- In response to claims that his Party had been guilty of extortion during the coalition talks, Shas Chairman Eli Yishai accused Kadima's negotiators of anti-Sephardic racism.
- A Dialog-Haaretz opinion poll published on Thursday (30 October) predicted that if an election were held now, Tzipi Livni's Kadima Party and Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party would be tied with 31 Knesset seats each, with Ehud Barak's Labor Party receiving just 10 seats. Two opinion polls published on Monday (27 October) put Kadima ahead of Likud, with Labor again coming in last. Dahaf gave Kadima 29, Likud 26 and Labor 11. TNS Teleseeker gave Kadima 31, Likud 29 and Labor 11.

- Livni's decision to take the country to general elections has put the Labor Party, which currently has 19 Knesset seats, in a weak position. In an interview with Israel Radio, Labor Party Chairman Ehud Barak disregarded the opinion polls as being an unreliable indicator of what would happen in an actual election.
- Security is likely to be a key electoral battle ground. Livni's stance towards Shas' demands over Jerusalem has demonstrated her willingness to make territorial concessions to achieve peace with the Palestinians. Netanyahu, her main rival, is against ceding captured territory to the Palestinians and has ruled out partitioning Jerusalem.
- The Dialog-Haaertz poll, published on Thursday (30 October), asked respondents which Party leader is most able to deal with Israel's security problems. 33 percent said Netanyahu, 26 percent said Barak, but only 14 percent said Livni. If the current Government fails to extend the current ceasefire with Hamas, due to expire in mid-December, security concerns are likely to rise further up the agenda.

Background

- Israeli President Shimon Peres had given the new Kadima leader, Tzipi Livni, until 3 November to form a governing coalition.
- Prior to her decision to end negotiations, Livni had already agreed a deal with Labor Party Chairman Ehud Barak, that Labor would be a part of her governing coalition (13 October). The now defunct agreement contained all of Labor's key demands, including improved benefits for senior citizens.
- Livni narrowly won the Kadima Primary leadership election on 17 September with 43.1% of the vote. Shaul Mofaz, her main rival, won 42% of the vote. During the Primary campaign Mofaz was regarded as having a better chance of forming a ruling coalition, but polls showed that Livni would be stronger in a general election against Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu.
- Livni has been Israel's Foreign Minister since March 2006. As Foreign Minister she has been heading the Israeli negotiations team during the Annapolis peace talks, meeting the Palestinian Authority negotiating team around twice a month since November 2007. Livni's involvement in these negotiations means that she is regarded by many as Israel's best hope for a negotiated peace settlement between the Israelis and Palestinians.
- The Kadima leadership race was triggered by Labor Chairman Ehud Barak, when he threatened to withdraw his party from Ehud Olmert's coalition, forcing a general election, unless Olmert stepped down over the multiple charges of corruption against him.