The Israeli Elections in 2006: Political Earthquake and Continuity

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The 2006 elections in Israel undoubtedly made a significant difference if compared with previous elections. For the first time in the political life of Israel the electoral victory went to a party without a history and probably with narrow chances for the future, created artificially to serve the ideological turn of its political and military leader. President Ariel Sharon's press conference announcement on 21 November of the creation of the new party Kadima (Forward) and his resignation from the Likud Party clearly marked a split in Israel's political system or a "Big Bang", as Minister of Justice Haim Ramon dubbed it (*Yediot Aharonot,* 4/3/2007). From an historic perspective Sharon's step has a much greater significance than the step taken by David Ben-Gurion in the 1950's, when he founded the Rafih Party and turned away from the Mapai (Labour). The political estrangement of the mythical leader David Ben-Gurion did not break apart the historic Mapai; in the case of Sharon, it gave rise to a different, almost unprecedented situation. Sharon broke with the Likud, a historic and popular party, in order to confront it in the elections, while his final aim was to continue with his policy of establishing the Israeli borders unilaterally.

At first, any observer could interpret that the future of the Kadima and its plans for unilateral withdrawal proposed in the political programme for the March 2006 elections relied solely on Sharon. As Akiva Eldar wrote in *Ha'aretz* "the creation of the Kadima and its possible success were attributable only to Sharon and to the face-lift performed by a brilliant group of political consultants and public relations aides" (*Ha'aretz,* (28/11/2007). In spite of the dramatic events following Sharon's brain stroke and the transfer of the party's leadership to Yehud Olmert, Kadima still won the elections. In other words, the central thesis that this article attempts to prove briefly is that, besides the uncontested leadership of Sharon, the Kadima represents much more than a party of his own. In fact, since the late seventies Kadima represents – although with a different name – an incipient middle class in Israel that looks for a safe place at the centre of the country's political landscape. In this sense, the Kadima represents a large portion of Israeli public opinion that for many years formed party lists under different banners. Moreover, the phenomenon of the Kadima will force the Labour and Likud parties to reflect on their political discourse in order to aim at the core block of Israeli voters who support the Centre.

But the Kadima phenomenon, in all its pervasiveness, was not the only one that marked the 2006 elections. Clearly there was a protest vote addressed to the entire political class of Israel. The high number of abstentions and the so-called "post-modern youth" vote to the Pensioners' Party in Tel Aviv which gave them 7 seats pointed at the existing distrust, not only in traditional parties, but in the political class itself. Usually, ethno-religious and new Radical Right parties are indirectly favoured by this kind of anti-system voting trend. The Shas Party (religious Sephardic), for instance, recovered part of its electorate, and although Arab parties did not see a dramatic increase in the number of voters, ideological radicalisation in the last years has contributed to give political relevance to the New Radical Right ("Israel Beiteinu") led by Avigdor Lieberman, who won 11 seats and almost surpassed the Likud, which barely reached 12 seats. To sum up, there is a strong trend towards the Centre and a clear protest vote aimed at the political class that shows popular apathy with respect to traditional

parties and their old political proposals, be it Amir Peretz's Labour socialist proposal or the territorial nationalism proposed by the Likud and its ideological allies such as Mavdal (national religious). On the other hand, the votes cast for ethnic-religious parties and Lieberman's New Right show that there is a growing mobilization of other sectors of the population. While Arab parties channel the vote of the Arab population – particularly young voters – support for the Shas Party is growing considerably among the low-income sector of eastern Jewish population, and Avigdor Lieberman's party channels the vote of Russian immigrants. As a point of interest and differing from other analysts' views, Avigdor Lieberman's party, or the "liebermanist faction" as it were, appears as the new partner of the political centre and not of the territorial right, which would have seemed logical. We will try to explain this dilemma in the light of internal sociological developments and the relationships between Palestinians, not only in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip but also within Israel, that is, the relationships with Arab-Israeli citizens. More specifically, it can be said that this new trend observed in Israeli society in the last elections is most likely to continue in future electoral processes.

a) Disenchantment with traditional political parties and their ideological postures. Above all, there is an absolute lack of confidence in the party system, which is regarded as below standards and inefficient. The war in Lebanon further increased this trend of distrust of a number of institutions such as the Army, which used to be critical in order to rely on national security.
b) A lack of confidence in the possibility of reaching territorial and peace agreements with the Palestinians. A lack of confidence as to being able to continue coexisting politically with the Arab-Israeli minority.
c) A rejection of the ultranationalist option in favour of settlements in Judea and Samaria.
d) The affirmation of the Jewish character of the State of Israel with borders close to those of 1967, which shall be unilaterally determined since there is no viable political negotiator on the Palestinian side, especially after the victory of Hamas in the Palestine legislative elections.
e) The little relevance of a social vote. Although the social vote was initially thought to be much more important in these elections than in preceding ones, eventually leading to massive support to Amir Peretz's Labour Party, the final results showed a somewhat different scenario. The 19 seats obtained by the Labour Party led by Amir Peretz were less than expected for a figure that had put all the emphasis on the social agenda.

These trends were unchanged by the Second War in Lebanon. In other words, there is a continuity that dates back to the days before this electoral process and is related to the social, economic and ideological strengthening of a global-thinking upper middle class of consumers. The political bloc representing this social class forms a government coalition which includes Kadima, the Pensioners' Party, which can be regarded as an extension of Kadima, Lieberman's New Right, which although appearing as a Radical Right party presents a political programme that could be an alternative to the programmes for settlements of Mavdal – the Radical Right – and even the Likud Party itself. Finally, Labour's joining of the coalition with its 19 seats is explained by a loss of identity of a party that is currently lacking a political and social agenda. This became evident with the role of Amir Peretz as Minister of Defence in the last war of Lebanon. These forces make up a stable coalition that represents the centre of Israeli society beyond considerations on the political future it may have. In other words, any possible future coalition will have to represent social sectors that wish to have a Jewish state "without settlements," or one with the least number possible of such settlements as well as of "Arab-Israelis" in the Jewish state. These conditions are supposed to enable continuity for a democratic Jewish state and also maintain its international legitimacy, particularly with regard to Western democracies.

Changes in the Party System

Without doubt, Israeli society – like many other Western societies — is going through a process of disenchantment with its political parties, which has led to a number of crises in the party system. Dalton & Wattenberg (2000) explain that the loss of connections between society and the political parties is a largely extended process among modern Western societies. High standards of living, political activities no longer espousing an ideology, the development of other civil society groups that channel political expression, and the growing corruption of the political class are so commonly extended that they have led to an overall weakening of representative democracy.

Undoubtedly, traditional political parties are mainly the most affected by this process. They are forced to move towards the centre of the political landscape, in accordance with the trend established by Anthony Downs (1957) which describes how traditional parties are forced to do away with the last traces of an ideology. In addition, bureaucracies and flourishing corruption transform the headquarters of traditional parties into "job agencies" and places for political machines. This leads the public to move away from traditional parties. Another factor that plays against traditional parties is the birth of what can be called "one-issue parties" that in many cases confer a new character on political systems. Many "one-issue parties" in Europe are those called Populist Radical Right parties that generally show a rejection of immigration and usually channel anti-system votes. The agendas of many of these anti-system parties are also taken up in some or other way by moderate right or conservative parties. Finally, the single factor that weakens voting for traditional parties is the trend of voting according to performance rather than responding to long-standing allegiances. This leads to an increased volatility, and in many cases, to fragmentation of the political system.

This process of disillusionment with traditional political parties and the breaking apart of the political system are sometimes accompanied by realignment on the basis of new social and ideological coalitions. This redefinition of the parties system alters the traditional balance for the coalitions which are bound to survive in the next elections. (Burnham, 1970; Crotty, 2006; Key, 1959). An increase in political activism and a greater polarization as a consequence of the new issues and coalitions are among the symptoms observed in party redefinitions.

In the case of Israel, and although a redefinition of the parties system took place, there are no signs of a sociologic or political revolution taking place. The Centre bloc that was thus far slightly dominant within the different political configurations such as Shinui and also in increasingly stronger factions within the traditional parties such as the Likud and Labour, is now consolidating itself as a winning political force. But Kadima, for the time being, is not a new ideological force. It lacks a mobilizing nationalism such as the one embodying the myth of the "Land of Israel" as contended by the extreme Right, nor does it reflect the utopianism of the "New Middle East" proposed by the Left. Kadima represents a tendency towards the Centre in Israeli politics whose "modern" history dates back to 1977 with the appearance of the D'ash Party (Democratic Movement for Change), which then contributed with its 15 seats to the downfall of the Labour Party. Although it disappeared as a political party, D'ash survived as an ideological posture that aimed at the burgeoning middle classes of the country. A series of different configurations followed in different electoral processes and finally, with Shinui, it had very remarkable elections results under the leadership of Tomi Lapid, and won 10 seats in the elections of 2003. The voters of these parties represent the new secularized and liberal middle classes of Israel. They have grown tired of Labour, a bureaucratic and corrupt party with links to professional circles, and are in total disagreement with the religious orthodoxy represented by parties like Shas (Sephardic religious orthodox) or Agudat Israel (Ashkenazi religious orthodox); the Israeli bourgeoisie appears to be tired of the Likud's populist national politics, let alone of the settlers' ultra nationalism.

The new Israeli middle class that flourished with the economic boom of the 70's became stronger as a social class thanks to the economic reforms carried out in Israel and throughout the world. Israel reaped the benefits of globalisation and technification and the strong social class that emerged, although not in absolute majority, represents a growing part of the population, one that keeps in control both economically and politically through its ideological dominance in the Supreme Court of Justice, and in key positions in the Bank of Israel and the Ministry of Finance. Just as Itzhak Rabin understood it in the early 1990's, Ariel Sharon also saw their electoral potential and thus adapted his political discourse in order to address this dynamic and modern sector of society. According to analysts Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir (2002), the Oslo peace process initiated by Rabin was basically the result of the social pressure exerted by this dynamic sector of society, especially of the industrialists seeking new regional markets.

What marks a difference from Rabin's days is that the great majority of this social class reached the conclusion that, albeit necessary, the peace process with the Palestinians was a failure, fundamentally due to Palestine's reactionary stance. They feel frustrated with the peace process and have misgivings about the Palestinians, but they oppose the idea of a Great Israel and hence they support the unilateral withdrawal proposed by Sharon. And what is interesting from a sociological standpoint, an important sector of Russian immigrants has joined this new and modern middle class in the last years. Russian immigrants generally

belong to the secular right and have in mind the model of an American democracy based on a strong state with authoritarian elements. Overall, the ideology of a great Eretz Israel is of no great appeal to this population, although they give importance to preserving the Western and modern character of Israeli society, even to the point of upholding a policy of military deterrence. In other words, although they are not entirely opposed to achieving peace with an eventual Palestinian state, they are largely in favour of maintaining – as long as peace does not come about – strong and decisive defence policies that are contrary to the pacifist postures of the liberal Left. This vision that sometimes has racist features, points at this sector's misgivings about Israeli multiculturalism in which political parties for Eastern orthodox Jews and Arabs alike are allowed to exist. Israel must be a Western country completely adhering to Western culture, particularly to American culture. There is no doubt that Lieberman is a representative of Russian immigrants. And what is probably most important, Lieberman, or rather, his political plans are increasingly gaining sympathies among the autochthonous middle classes. In other words, his plan is also in the spirit of a philosophy of "conflict resolution" that is dear to many voters of Kadima. According to Timothy Waters (2007), Lieberman's plans have many coincidences with the classic solution of "two states for two peoples, the Jewish and the Palestine." Moreover, to some extent it can be defined as a radical post-territorial, post-expansionist right since it assumes that in order to protect Jewish cultural or ethnic hegemony within the State of Israel not only is it necessary to give up the settlements in the territories but also disengage from parts of the sovereign territory of Israel where the Arab population is concentrated. This includes the border zones such as Umm El Fahen, which would supposedly, and in turn, become a part of a future Palestinian State (Spektorowski and Klauber, 2006).

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This New Radical Right can neither easily be integrated into the territorial project of right-wing settlers, nor to that of the "Mavdal" or the Moledet's project, based on territorial conquest, settlements and transfer of the Palestine population. The vote to Lieberman's party can thus be explained by two main reasons. On the one hand, the mass of Russian immigrants who feel represented by Lieberman. But besides Lieberman's specific personality, the "Lieberman Plan" aims at the Centre of Israeli citizens and can even be appealing for some people in the Zionist Left. This ought to be explained accurately: Israeli leftists find it difficult to accept a politician that shows little respect for democratic procedures and who advocates an electoral reform that would turn Israel from a parliamentary to a presidential democracy without a liberal Constitution and would transform the Israeli political system into a democracy of power-concentration. For many, Lieberman is a fearsome character precisely because of his continuous attacks on the Supreme Court of Justice and the State accountability bodies that are supposedly a hurdle for "democratic governance" (Sternhell, 2007). What is more, Lieberman can hardly be accepted in view of his racist notions; as Akiva Eldar wrote in Ha'aretz (13/03/2006), "although some extremist parties that sat in the Knesset – for instance, Rehavam Zee'vi's "Moledet"– had a fascist agenda, Lieberman's is the first extremist party that is embraced by the Israeli mainstream," which gives evidence of the degradation of Israeli society. The question is why this becomes a mainstream phenomenon, the answer lying on the Israeli Jewish public perception of the radicalization of Arab-Israelis and the growing popularity of post Zionist ideology advocated by Jewish intellectuals like Ilan Pappe, Yoav Peled, Iri Ram and others, as well as by Arab members of Congress, especially Azmi Basharra.

Lieberman is the clearest voice opposing post Zionist ideology. And while for Jewish people from the Left and the Right alike, Israel is a Jewish and democratic state, even when these two criteria may seem difficult to coordinate, but which are the basis of what can be called liberal or democratic nationalism (a Jewish cultural hegemony that also concedes civil liberties to all citizens), Arab-Israeli citizens, especially the young ones, are not resigned to this situation. Lieberman uses an increasingly radicalised rhetoric that in the last years led to a greater demand of "Liebermanism" among the Jewish population. In other words, this demand denotes that

the creation of an independent Palestinian State in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank is not seen as a problem in times of peace, but that the claim by Arab-Israeli to put an end to Zionist dominance in the State of Israel is the most worrying issue for the Jewish population of Israel.

From the electoral standpoint, for many observers Lieberman's Israel Beiteinu Party would be a relevant partner for Netanyahu's Likud, both forming an opposition force or as a future government coalition. But the feasibility of such rapprochement is overshadowed by Israel Beiteinu's current partnership with Kadima, which seems a more natural one because they both represent the "new spirit" of the population of Israel, while Netanyahu's territorial nationalism and that of the Mavdal (national religious) are perceived as something from the past, hence its rejection by the Israeli electorate. This implies that if Netanyahu seriously intends to win the next elections, he will clearly need to dissociate himself from the Mavdal and its flirting with the territorial right. It is clear that both the political corruption within the Likud and what was understood as an unrealistic political programme contributed to move Netanyahu away from his voters. In the last months Netanyahu has rooted out corruption in the party and he now appears as an outstanding candidate in the upcoming elections. However, in order for this transformation to be complete so as to allow his political comeback, Netanyahu must aim at the political centre of the electorate, as the Kadima did. This is not a difficult deed at present, since the idea of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal is now completely delegitimized. On the other hand, Netanyahu would need to avoid being associated to the settlers' ideology considering that, since Oslo, the political centre of Israel gave up the idea of massive settlements in spite of the successive governments' settlement policies, especially in the areas bordering Jerusalem and in the city itself. This means that any political party aiming at forming a government in future elections cannot move away from what was outlined by Kadima in the 2006 elections, since it is based on an increasingly hegemonic and all-encompassing public opinion trend that includes sectors of the Labour Party and, to a certain extent, pragmatic sectors of the Likud.

Thus, the 2006 elections registered a steady trend which had been building up for quite a long time. In spite of the unprecedented number of voters that decided to vote a Centre party, opinion among the Israeli population had for some time been largely oriented to the centre of the political landscape. As Arian and Shamir (2005) demonstrated in previous elections, 51% of those who felt identified neither with the Left nor with the Right voted a Centre party. 73% of those who identified with the Right voted a Right party while 71% of those who did with a Left party voted a Left party. This was the prevailing model since 1969. In the latest elections, however, a larger number of voters who identified with the Left and the Right voted a Centre option, whereas those who previously identified with the Centre maintained their preference and voted the Centre in the political landscape (Samir and Arian, 1999). En 2003, 32% of people who identified with the Centre voted a Centre party as compared with 82% of leftists that voted the Left and 88% of rightists who voted for a party of the Right. In 1999 the figures showed 51% for the Centre, 88% for the Left and 90% for the Right. In 2006 the correspondence between votes to the Right and to the Left and those who have sympathies for either of them was weaker, while the correspondence between votes to the Centre and those who have sympathies for the Centre was reinforced. This means that the Centre was politically consolidated as a winning force.

What Future Lies Ahead for the Ideological and/or Political Debate?

As a conclusion, it seems relevant to reflect on two criteria that are not necessarily relevant. Political debates around the issue of ideology among Centre-left parties and Right parties, that is Zionist parties, is practically over, following the handover of Gaza, which is consistent with what was previously explained here. Any future debate shall be focused around the issues of corruption or those regarding good or bad management. There are no differences in any of the opposition to Hamas, Hezbollah or Iran. Left and Right agree insofar as justifying the Israeli operations in Lebanon. Criticisms of the army (IDF - Israel Defense Forces), of government planning and perhaps to how relevant a war was at the specific moment in which it happened come from the entire political spectrum. But nobody has any doubts when regarding Hezbollah, Iran and Hamas as the enemy to whom nothing can be conceded. Likewise, there are no doubts that Israel should agree to establish dialogue with Syria if this country takes significant steps such as dismantling its relationship with Teheran and with terrorist organizations based in Damascus. This is part of a

political debate with organizational implications rather than ideological ones.

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In other words, the ideological confrontation between a "Great Israel" and an Israel for Peace is now concluded. However, this does not mean that an ideological discussion about the future of Israel or of its political identity in the long-term cannot be initiated; even if the political sense of such a debate were overlooked in the short term, it would be still a valid one for the future. Debate will most likely take place between Azmi Bashara, Arab-Israeli parties and post Zionist Jewish intellectuals, on the one hand, and "moderate liebermanism" on the other. Bashara and Lieberman are the personification of two tendencies, although this does not mean that they shall necessarily represent them in the form of a "Zionism-versus-Post-Zionism" debate in the future. There is no doubt that the future of Post-Zionism is not a promising one in Israel. It is practically impossible to witness a transformation of such an ideological version into a politically critical mass. In other words, it is difficult to see it emerge as a political deciding force or a "third force" that could emerge to define a competition between a Zionist Left and a Zionist Right. For the time being, none of the leftist parties would agree to negotiate their Zionist tradition with post-Zionist forces coming from Arab parties. The Ra'am –Tal Party, with four seats, the Hadash communist party and Balad with three seats each, have too little political weight for any Zionist party to accept even a small part of their political agendas. As long as the issue at debate is equality in the labour market, the great majority of Zionist parties are in favour of the claims of Arab citizens, perhaps only by paying lip service to it. But when the debate is carried out in the field of symbols and the Israeli Citizenship Law, Zionist parties are not willing to negotiate.

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