

## Lieberman banking on a right-wing gov't

Tovah Lazaroff, THE JERUSALEM POST

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Israel Beiteinu head Avigdor Lieberman is still targeting the plummeting Likud and its leader Binyamin Netanyahu as his natural coalition partner.

"I prefer the coalition of the national camp, with the Likud and the National Union and National Religious Party with Shas and United Torah Judaism," Lieberman told *The Jerusalem Post* on Sunday.

A *Jerusalem Post* poll gave this coalition anywhere from 48-51 mandates as of last Thursday. Still, Lieberman said he believed the right-wing parties had a chance of hitting the 61 mark needed to form a government.

"I am not sure the polls are showing the picture we will see on the 29th of March," he said. "I hope the right wing will take enough seats to establish a coalition. We must work very hard to achieve this."

Lieberman and Netanyahu appeared to be at odds last week, as they verbally attacked each other. Lieberman said Netanyahu was panicking; Netanyahu in turn told voters not to support Lieberman. The two men met last Monday, with Lieberman reportedly rejecting a coalition offer from Netanyahu.

But Lieberman said on Sunday that, while he was coming to no coalition agreements prior to the elections, he clearly preferred Netanyahu to Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who heads Kadima, or Labor Party leader Amir Peretz when it came to forming the next government.

The Likud and Israel Beiteinu signed vote-sharing agreements last month, by which surplus votes would be pooled to grant either the one or the other an additional mandate.

Lieberman and Netanyahu have a history of working together. When Netanyahu was prime minister in the 1990s, Lieberman was the director-general of his office.

The Likud has also said that it preferred this coalition. Central committee member Yossi Fuchs said that since Sunday he was among those in the party who were working on an informal agreement of this kind.

Fuchs said he believed that voters were considering the overall political bloc a party would belong to and not just the party itself. If the voters believed these parties had a chance of forming a coalition that could govern, they would be more likely to vote for them, said Fuchs.

He added that he believed the parties could make up the missing mandates in the last week of the election. At the 90th minute, people were likely to return to the Likud, he said.

Still, Lieberman said he was not ruling out either Kadima or Labor as coalition partners, unlike some of the other parties on the Right.

"For me, every Zionist party can be acceptable. It depends on the platform of the government. It's not good to say in advance I

will never sit with someone," he said.

Lieberman, who allowed himself to be fired from the last government for refusing to support the Gaza Strip pullout, added that he did have red lines regarding what he would accept in a future government.

"If they say we will leave all the settlements, I say 'no, nyet.' If they say we can speak with Hamas and transfer money to them, I will say 'nyet.' If they say we need your help to establish a Jewish state, I will say 'yes,'" Lieberman said.

He called Kadima's diplomatic plan to execute further unilateral steps with an eye toward drawing Israel's permanent borders a "Purim spiel." Lieberman has his own plan to redraw Israel's borders by relinquishing Arab population centers while retaining large Jewish ones within the territories.

NU-NRP head Benny Elon told the *Post* that he, too, believed that the right-wing bloc would succeed and that "Ehud Olmert will not be the next prime minister." Already, he said, the initial stage of the plan to expand the right wing had been successful.

In the last election, he and Lieberman ran together, Elon said. This time around they split, believing that they would draw more votes alone. "In the last election we were seven [mandates] and now we are 20," he said. The *Post* poll has given each party 9-10 mandates, and Channel 1 poll on Monday gave Israel Beiteinu as many as 12 mandates.

Shas continues to hold its cards close to its chest and refused to comment even speculatively on the coalition it prefers, even though Israel Beiteinu, the Likud and the NU-NRP all believe that Shas is their partner in this endeavor.

"We have a coalition with the nation," a Shas spokesman said. The party's top concern was the good of the nation, he said, and it would be impossible to determine what that was until after the election.

He did add, however, that economics was a key factor for the party, which would be looking to restore services and benefits to the economically disadvantaged, who had been harmed by past budget cuts in social services.

When asked about its ideal coalition, a Kadima party strategist said that the party was not exploring coalition options right now, but was solely focused on "simply winning the elections."

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