

Electionscape: Shas is Kadima's must-have party

Anshel Pfeffer, THE JERUSALEM POST

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Shas spiritual leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's latest pronouncement, made in an interview to a haredi newspaper over the weekend, that "whoever votes Kadima [forward in English] goes backwards to hell" can easily be explained away as yet another in a long series of ridiculous quotes from the sage's wisdom.

Much more interesting was the condition the rabbi set for Shas entering into a coalition with those same helldwellers. "I won't let our representatives enter the government if the child allowances aren't returned," he ruled.

Of course there's nothing new about this condition. Ever since the Sharon government changed the criteria for the payments, which in the past benefited mainly ultra-Orthodox families with large numbers of children, Shas and UTJ have been demanding a return to the old policy.

What is interesting is that Yosef's words seemed to contradict those of Shas Chairman MK Eli Yishai, who has been telling reporters over the last few days that the problem with a Kadima government was Ehud Olmert's new pullback plan.

The truth of the matter is that Yishai has strict orders from the rabbi to be a part of the next coalition at all costs. If not, his days as chairman are numbered. Yosef doesn't really mind more pullbacks, and he wants to make sure that after three years in opposition, Shas's educational movement are reconnected to government cash-flow.

If you look closely at what Yishai actually said, he didn't veto participation in a government that implemented the pullbacks, he just said he would "recommend to the Council of Torah Sages not to join such a government."

Since the council is Yosef's one-man show, the decision will remain unchanged. Of course Yishai knows this. He is simply fending off accusations from Likud and the rest of the right-wing that he's already cut a deal with Olmert. Since almost all Shas voters are on the right, such accusations could be ruinous.

Whether or not Yishai and Olmert have already secretly met to draw up a coalition agreement, as some sources insist, it's clear that Shas is this election's must-have party. There is almost no scenario in which Kadima can form a coalition without the party, whether it's a left, center-left, center or center-right coalition.

This isn't necessarily bad news for Olmert. Shas might demand costly social legislation, but as for the more critical arena, division of the spoils around the cabinet table, they are interested in the less-popular portfolios such as labor, health, social affairs and housing. If push ever comes to shove in the West Bank, they probably won't vote in favor of the plan in the Knesset, but they won't leave the government over it either.

Two days before the polls open, the only sure bet is that Kadima will form the next government together with Shas and a couple of other parties, probably to be named by the end of this week.

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