

Electionscape: Slings and arrows of election ads target Netanyahu

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Mar. 9, 2006

By the amount of vitriol thrown at Binyamin Netanyahu in the election broadcasts, you'd think that he was the favorite to win these elections, not the leader of a party lagging behind in third place in the polls.

It was not only his mortal enemies on the Kadima team who took a swipe at him by putting pictures of Netanyahu sweating and pacing up and down next to dictionary definitions of "hysteria" and "panic." Shas accused him with stark photos of poverty and the National Union/NRP attacked him from the right, while Labor, Israel Beiteinu and Uzi Dayan's anti-sleaze Tafnit party all lumped him together with Olmert as an unworthy candidate.

In the end it might end up helping Bibi. Likud leaders have always gained voters from the underdog position. But if so many parties are convinced that attacking him is the popular thing to do, perhaps it means his days as a potential prime minister are indeed over.

Everyone says now that the broadcasts aren't important, that they have low ratings and don't influence the way people vote. I seem to remember writing that myself in my last column, but that hasn't diminished the efforts the parties and their creative teams put into them.

On Tuesday I stood next to Kadima's supreme spin-doctor Eyal Arad at the big event put on at the party's headquarters for the first night of the broadcasts. Arad harbors a visceral hatred of Netanyahu. The moment the Likud clip came on with professor Ben-Zion Netanyahu and son Binyamin, he whispered, "I don't believe it, he's using his father. He couldn't get anyone else to say a good word for him."

Later, when the Likud showed an Ariel Sharon speech and made an unfavorable comparison between him and Olmert, he was ecstatic. "They've fallen exactly into the trap we hoped for, the moment they begin speaking about 'the Sharon way' they're letting us call the shots, we're the party of Sharon. That's what everyone wants in a campaign, to be able determine the terms of reference, now they've given it us on a platter."

His partner Lior Horev had nothing but scorn for Labor's efforts. "Just look how Peretz is standing in front of the camera, checking if his flies are closed." On the second day of broadcasts, Kadima was quick to ridicule Netanyahu with a quote from his father who once said that his son would make a great foreign minister, but he's not that hot as a prime minister.

But beyond politics, the broadcasts show a lot of interesting things about Israeli society. Take Shas for example. The ultra-Orthodox party's chairman, Eli Yishai, appeared with three large blue and white flags behind him, while Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's picture was barely in the frame, once unthinkable scenery for a haredi politician. Israel Beiteinu's Avigdor Lieberman was introduced again and again as "an Israeli like us all" leading "a typical Israeli life." Both parties are eager to be part of the coalition, but there is an underlying yearning of a new generation of haredim and olim to be accepted as equals, not only as blackmailing coalition partners.

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