

Middle Israel: The politicians' challenge

Amotz Asa-Ei, THE JERUSALEM POST

Mar. 23, 2006

"I was right in all my predictions except one," a self-congratulating David Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary one day after the Jewish state's first general election, in winter 1949.

As would be the case in almost all the subsequent Israeli elections, that poll neither caused nor even just reflected a massive transition, but merely consolidated the existing political reality. Back in '49 that meant that the Left, whose leaders were seen as the creators of the young state and the winners of its War of Independence, emerged firmly empowered (Ben-Gurion's Mapai won 46 seats and the Marxist Mapam 19). The only "surprise" to which B-G could allude was the size of one party's following (Mapam's, which he had expected to be even higher).

In fact, out of 15 parliamentary elections that have been held here so far, and an additional one for the premiership only, only three heralded massive, historic transition: '77, '92 and '03. The first, Menachem Begin's landslide defeat of Labor, brought Israel's first-ever change of power and signaled the Likud's rise to nearly three decades of political prominence. The second, Yitzhak Rabin's victory over Likud, resulted in the launch of the Oslo process, and the third, in which Ariel Sharon and the Likud won by a margin that had not been seen here for a quarter of a century, resulted in the abandonment of Oslo, the rise of the anti-terror fence and the disengagement plan.

Other Israeli elections, while seldom boring, did not, at the end of the day, either reflect or generate fundamental change; next Tuesday's, however, will.

THE BIG turning points in Israeli political history - 1959, 1967 and 1985 - did not initially seem electorally meaningful.

In '59 Israel was rocked by ethnic riots, when North African immigrants set ablaze the Haifa slum of Wadi Salib following a local resident's killing by a policeman. Though in that year's general election Ben-Gurion's following did not decline, the riots forced the Labor establishment to confront its failure to treat Israel's social gaps, and Labor's opponents to get a first feel of the social periphery's political potential.

In '67, in the aftermath of the Six Day War, Israel was faced with the territorial dilemma that would gradually split it down the middle. And in '85 Israel launched the economic stabilization plan that marked the beginning of the long retreat from its founders' socialist ethos. Next week's election will mark the end of the post-'67 era's politics of utopia and herald instead an era that will be post-heroic, post-ideological, post-territorial and, on matters of war and peace, neo-centrist.

The territorial debate that followed the '67 war emerged immediately after the cease-fire, when luminaries of the scale of authors Amos Oz and S.Y. Agnon took opposite sides in the clash between the greater-Israel and land-for-peace schools of thought. Initially, that debate seemed theoretical, particularly after the Khartoum Summit of Arab leaders where the idea of land-for-peace, and for that matter peace for anything, was formally and publicly rejected. Still, the next decade's land-for-peace deal with Egypt restored the attractiveness of that formula, not long before Israel invaded Lebanon on the one hand, and began massively settling the West Bank on the other.

The result of this confluence was a dramatic escalation in the clash between the two territorial schools of thought. Ideologically, each entrenched in its conviction that its formula, if only adopted, would bring a panacea to Israel, and that the other school, if prevalent, would condemn the Zionist experiment to death. Politically, the confrontation between the two was rapidly becoming

nasty, and at times also violent, culminating in a peace demonstrator's murder in 1983 and a prime minister's assassination the following decade. Meanwhile, the entire political system took sides in a black-and-white dichotomy whereby all parties orbited either Likud or Labor, which in turn focused on nurturing rather than resolving their territorial differences.

Between 1977 and 2003, the political map was split almost evenly between the two schools. Even the Likud's historic victory in '77 left intact the land-for-peace support base in the Knesset, which included Begin's three key ministers Yigael Yadin, Moshe Dayan and, eventually, Ezer Weizman. Similarly, Rabin's decisive victory in '92 left intact the greater-Israel parliamentary base, as was reflected in the hair-thin, and democratically questionable, majorities he produced for the votes that approved the successive Oslo agreements.

This Gordian knot, of electoral ties on the one hand and ideological entrenchment on the other, is what Ariel Sharon untied.

THE HUMBLING of the territorial ideologies came in two installments. First, in the wake of the Palestinian uprising of the late 1980s that convinced many on the Right that Israel could not, in the long run, digest the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza; and then, in the aftermath of the Oslo process that made thousands of land-for-peace believers doubt its feasibility.

Sharon understood that when he decided to turn his back on the ideology with which he had become synonymous. Moreover, as the man who was at the center of the strife that accompanied both the Lebanon invasion and the settlement drive, he came to perceive the restoration of the pre-'67 consensus as even more crucial for Israel's future than the territorial maximalism to which he had until then dedicated his eventful political career.

A particularly intriguing question, in this regard, is who inspired whom: Sharon the newly centrifuged Israeli public, or the public Sharon. Sharon's embrace of the anti-terror fence, for instance, came grudgingly and only in response to grassroots demand, which in some cases included the building of makeshift barriers in proximity to the Green Line by local residents who had been continuously exposed to Palestinian theft and sniping. Similarly, the disengagement idea was not Sharon's, but the demographically alarmed geographer Arnon Sofer's.

Still, following next week's election Sharon is likely to go down in Israel's political annals as the man who ended the territorial debate and restored the Israeli consensus; not only because the political creature he bequeathed us, Kadima, is so centrist and not only because it seems on its way to victory, but because even the rivals who flank it from Left and Right have effectively abandoned their historic territorial rhetoric, as they now concede, if even passively, that the public is no longer prepared to hear, let alone follow, their equally failed utopias.

Labor no longer speaks of a New Middle East, and the Likud, whose two main leaders' misgivings about the disengagement idea were tactical rather than ideological, speaks not about the settlement ideal but about confronting Hamas, and its unworthiness as a beneficiary of future withdrawals. In other words, a different Palestinian leadership would possibly be worthy of further Israeli withdrawals, even according to the Likud. These are fair arguments, but they are instrumental rather than ideological.

Similarly, Avigdor Lieberman, once a major Greater Israelite, no longer sanctifies land and now espouses the entirely different concept of territorial exchange, and is even prepared to part with parts of municipal Jerusalem. United Torah Judaism helped disengagement happen as loyal members in Sharon's coalition, and Shas memorably helped Oslo happen as key members in Yitzhak Rabin's coalition.

In short, for a truly ideological stance in favor of Greater Israel of the kind once offered by the Likud, voters must now opt for the National Union-NRP and the anecdotal parties to its right. If between them these parties win a tenth of Tuesday's poll they will celebrate. And even if one adds to them the Likud, whose ticket includes disengagers like Micky Eitan and Silvan Shalom, it seems that next week the public will grant the Greater Israel cause hardly a third of its votes, and thus deal it the kind of devastating blow it dealt the land-for-peace idea in '03.

THE DECLINE of the territorial debate has finally made room for the emergence of domestic debates that had long vanished from Israel's political discourse, as well as the rise of post-heroic leaders.

The last time Israel had launched a major domestic reform until the Sharon premiership was in 1985, when Shimon Peres was faced with a hyper-inflation crisis, to which he responded by freezing wages, prices and hiring; abolishing food and transport subsidies; slashing the defense budget and empowering the Bank of Israel to independently set interest rates.

Though that shock treatment had its fair share of opponents at the time (including Sharon, who was still a populist), the public did not configure economics in determining its voting patterns. For most voters, the main dilemma was what the politicians were debating most passionately: the territories.

Now, after the Sharon-Netanyahu reforms which have sold almost every worthwhile asset the government had on its shelf and at the same time reformed the pension industry, shrank social spending, de-monopolized the seaports and ended the banking industry's overbearing role in the financial markets, a genuine, healthy and long-overdue economic debate has finally emerged here. Similarly, the Sharon-Livnat reforms in the school system, which were based on the Dovrat blueprint that sought, among other things, to empower school principals, shorten the school week and prolong the school day, have generated an educational debate.

As the new Knesset settles in next month the question is whether these and other domestic debates can finally dominate the politicians' agendas. Naturally, if Kadima wins and proceeds to implement Ehud Olmert's plan to unilaterally consolidate a border in the West Bank, that design and its execution will initially dominate the next Knesset's and government's work. With Hamas in power Kadima may find the newly pragmatic mainstream public reluctant to back what will not be clearly imperative and feasible. Yet even if the next government starts off with an ambitious pullout effort, it will very quickly find the domestic issues demanding attention, and will get down to the business of at least beginning to address them.

Besides the economy and the education system, where Kadima's ideas are essentially variations on Sharon's themes, movement can also be expected on the adoption of a constitution, governmental reform and conversion issues. Here, the big enigma is Olmert's attitude toward the ultra-Orthodox parties. As mayor of Jerusalem he waltzed with them so enthusiastically that he saw his own Likud party nearly vanish while he himself effectively handed the city over to its first-ever ultra-Orthodox mayor. Then again, as Sharon's coalition maker, he masterminded the first coalition in 26 years that lacked an ultra-Orthodox component.

THE DOMESTICATION of the political agenda is coming coupled with a personal transition.

There is a clear common denominator among this election's three aspiring prime ministers: not one of them has done anything like create the Jewish state, build its nuclear and aerospace programs, lead underground organizations, defeat three armies in six days or turn a war's tide by leading troops from Asia to Africa across a burning canal. Instead of the likes of Ben-Gurion, Peres, Rabin, Begin, Shamir or Sharon, Israeli voters are now being served with a lawyer, a diplomat and a union leader, a selection that much more resembles what other veteran democracies usually produce. It is a choice that may be a bit less sexy than what we had grown accustomed to here over the years, but then again, heroic as these leaders were, their heroism also often got Israel embroiled in misadventures it could hardly afford.

Indeed, the next prime minister's task will be to reduce Israel's friction with its neighbors, enhance its political stability and deliver more prosperity. If it's Kadima that will be tasked with leading this effort, it will have to prove that it is not only better glued than previous centrist formations, and at the same time keep in mind that even in a post-utopian era lasting political success still requires conviction and passion. If its leaders do not quickly demonstrate that they can fight sincerely and harmoniously for something - whether that be electoral and constitutional reform or social compassion or civil marriages or a five-day school week or something else that enough people will care about - then their turn at the wheel may prove not much longer than that of the *Titanic's* skipper. Conversely, if they learn the centrist energy they are tapping into and cautiously nurture it, they may well build what will dominate Israeli politics as durably as the Left and Right did, respectively, before and after '77.

As Israel formally parts next week with its heroic leaders, much will be said of their occasional adventurism, conceit and blindness. Still, there can be no arguing the resolve and sense of purpose with which they understood their jobs. Will the same be true of their successors? For more about that, stay tuned for Israel's next four political years.

This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1139395664369&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

[[Back to the Article](#)]

Copyright 1995-2006 The Jerusalem Post - <http://www.jpost.com/>