

Last update - 02:13 19/02/2006

Oh, what a wonderful country

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If the Israeli pollsters do not get trapped by a mistake similar to the one that tripped up the Palestinian research institutes, which failed to predict the extent of support for Hamas, then the expected results of the 17th Knesset elections attest to an upheaval: The Israeli voter, as he appears six weeks before the decisive day, won't be voting for a leader.

The weekend polls confirm a trend that has been emerging since Ariel Sharon was hospitalized: Benjamin Netanyahu and Amir Peretz are not managing to sweep up votes. Likud and Labor are in serious but stable shape in terms of their fans: around 20 seats for Labor, and about 15 seats for the Likud. The personal publicity campaigns both parties have launched to aggrandize their leaders' charm are not impressing voters.

In Kadima the picture is ironically similar: This list is also maintaining stability in its hold on the public, some 40 seats, but it is managing to do this not because of the person who now heads it. Ariel Sharon's charm continues to cling to the party and from this it maintains its strength: despite the harsh personal attacks on Ehud Olmert by the Likud and Labor parties, Kadima's standing in the polls is identical to its standing on the eve of Sharon's hospitalization. Even though the score the public gave Olmert's performance (5.3 on a scale of 1 to 10, according to the Haaretz-Channel 10 News poll) is considerably lower than the one he was given last month (around 6.5), support for Kadima remains unchanged.

It is possible to argue that the map of support for the three major parties indicates a substantial change in the voting considerations of the Israeli public: It has ostensibly rid itself of the stipulation to measure parties by their leaders and is tailoring its preferences based on other motives. This possibility is bolstered by an analysis of the Haaretz-Channel 10 News poll published last Thursday: There are real contradictions between the degree of public support voiced for Likud and Labor and that voiced for Netanyahu and Peretz, just as there is a significant gap between Netanyahu's popularity and the right's clout and between Peretz's support and the left's clout. An analysis of the Yedioth Ahronoth poll published Friday leads to a similar conclusion: the leaders of the three major parties are not the decisive factor for voters.

What, then, influences the Israeli voter in 2006? Not the lists' leaderships, as demonstrated by the makeup of the top 10 slots in Kadima (exceedingly familiar figures who do not deter voters) and Labor (a relatively fresh team that can't seem to draw favor). Nor, unfortunately, their ideology. Supposedly, there are clear

identification tags marking the Likud ("right"), Kadima ("center") and Labor ("left") in their approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but in practice the three parties speak a similar language. Not only have some senior politicians moved from one party to another, thereby demonstrating how little ideological meaning is attached to organizational membership, and not only are the parties deliberately toning down their positions, to appeal to as broad a public as possible - but the Hamas victory has placed them on a single square: all three are refusing to speak with it, champion its defeat or removal from positions of influence, and do not offer voters alternatives. What determines the voters' attitude is, apparently, the mood. The elections to the 17th Knesset, which were moved forward because of the disengagement and were intended to bring the citizens of Israel to reach a historic decision about the future of the West Bank, are being controlled completely by publicists and advertising executives who are giving it the appearance of a mundane sports competition. The audience in the bleachers remains indifferent: It does not demand that the parties answer the important questions, and the parties are not volunteering to shake the audience out of its complacency and discuss its destiny. Oh, what a wonderful country.

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