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Analysis: No doubting failure of electoral system

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It's not unreasonable at the end of an election campaign, when the polling stations close and three television stations release highly sophisticated exit polls, to expect that you will know definitively who has won.

That modest hope was denied the Israeli electorate on Tuesday night.

The party predicted by those TV exit polls to be the biggest in the next parliament, Tzipi Livni's Kadima, understandably claimed victory.

But so, too, also understandably, did the party that the polls suggested will head the largest bloc in the new Knesset, Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud.

Also claiming electoral success was Israel Beiteinu, now solidly the third-largest party in Israeli politics, with its leader Avigdor Lieberman the key to the nature of the next coalition - at least according to most of the numerous permutations.

Drawing comparisons with the outgoing Knesset, the Likud had every right to feel elated; it soared from 12 seats to somewhere around 30, the only massive rise in support of any party in these elections.

But drawing comparisons with the surveys in the final weeks of the campaign, the joyous post-exit-poll scenes at Kadima headquarters were justified too. The outgoing party of government, which had been lagging behind the Likud, had apparently overtaken its rival in the final straight.

Israel Beiteinu was celebrating too, even though its rise from 11 last time to the mid-teens was far less dramatic than some polls had been predicting, and belied the sense that the momentum was strongly with Lieberman in the last stages of the campaign.

Smart pundits were awaiting the final results of Tuesday's election - including soldiers' votes and the possible last-minute shifts caused by complex surplus-vote arrangements - before predicting what our next government will look like.

Smart key politicians, by contrast, were trying to preempt that final count and spare President Shimon Peres any dilemmas by attempting to finalize coalition partnerships.

Livni, indeed, attempted to preempt even the exit polls, declaring earlier Tuesday that whichever party garnered the most seats would have won "the trust of the public" and "no one can argue with that."

The Likud's Gidon Sa'ar promptly countered that Livni had failed to build a coalition under more promising conditions three months ago, prompting these very elections, and that Peres would inevitably charge Netanyahu, likely to be recommended by party leaders representing a majority in the new Knesset, with the task of building a coalition.

Given that Lieberman was Netanyahu's bureau chief when the Likud leader was prime minister in the late 1990s, there was every expectation that the Israel Beiteinu head would be opting for a renewal of that partnership, even though it seems to have been forgotten that he was deputy prime minister in Ehud Olmert's Kadima government until barely a year ago.

Most of Lieberman's voters would certainly expect a partnership with the Likud, and so would his number two, ex-Likud ideologue Uzi Landau.

But a Likud-Israel Beiteinu alliance might prompt both Kadima and Labor to choose the opposition benches, and what then would become of Netanyahu's declared aspiration to form a "unity" coalition and prevent a rerun of his unsuccessful 1996-99 prime ministership?

President Peres was in a decisive mood Tuesday, urging Israelis to come out and exercise their democratic right to vote, and reminding them that the alternative to the ballot box was the bomb and the gun.

He was decisive, too in an opinion piece published in *The Washington Post* on election day, in restating the joint Israeli-Palestinian imperative for a two-state solution.

"Having personally witnessed the remarkable progress we have made with the Palestinian Authority in recent years," he wrote, "I believe that a two-state solution is not only the best resolution to this age-old conflict but one within our reach."

But the final election tally, even though it will be clearer by the time he wakes up on Wednesday morning - very early, as is his habit - may present a challenge even to the decisive president.

Election legislation grants Peres considerable leeway when it comes to deciding which politician to charge with the task of forming our next coalition. And while tradition has always seen the head of the largest Knesset party given the first opportunity to do so, the results this time could present a real presidential headache.

If the final tally still shows Kadima as the largest party, but Netanyahu the favored prime minister of most of the new intake of MKs, Peres might well feel he *would* have to argue with Livni's assertion about the biggest party's head having won the public's trust, and defer to the relative superiority of the right-wing bloc over the Left.

His dilemma would deepen considerably if Kadima remains the biggest party but Netanyahu, despite getting more support from the various party chiefs, falls short of the 61 seats that constitute a Knesset majority. Who, then, would the president choose to form a coalition? Would his path through these uncharted waters be informed by the fact that he himself is an ex-Kadima heavyweight and Livni's Israeli-Palestinian vision is far closer to his own than Netanyahu's? Which other factors might guide him?

The very fact that the president may face this kind of dilemma underlines the unworkability of the Israeli electoral system, which has gradually seen "big" parties losing support to the extent where, as in 2006, no single party seems to have won the backing of more than a quarter of the Knesset.

The repeat now of that kind of splintered parliament would seem likely to condemn Israel to new general elections in the not-too-distant future, and to bolster the imperative for urgent electoral reform, with the system of pure proportional representation amended to feature at least a partial constituency vote.

Then again, the need for reform was one of the conclusions drawn in 2006, and yet the outgoing Knesset could not even agree on so much as a slight rise in the two percent threshold for parliamentary representation.

If "success" in Tuesday's elections was a vague and relative concept, then failure was much clearer. Labor failed, slipping back still farther from the 19 seats it won last time. Shas seemed to have declined, and so too the smaller parties farther to the right and left.

But the most blatant failure was that of our electoral system, insistently unreformed by our politicians, and again apparently denying whoever becomes prime minister the solid bedrock of parliamentary support so vitally needed to steer Israel through the mounting regional challenges it faces.