

The 2008 Municipal Elections in Israel – Outcome and Political Implications

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On November 11 Israel held its municipal elections in 164 settlements. 660 candidates competed on the post of mayor. A second round of the elections – in 31 settlements where the race was not decided in the first round – took place on November 25. General elections to the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, are scheduled to February 10, 2009. The municipal elections, in which half of the eligible voters participated, are regarded by many as an indicator of the possible outcome of the Knesset elections. In the following pages we shall demonstrate however that the correlation between municipal and general elections in Israel is quite weak.

The Israeli Voting System – Between Municipal and General Elections

Thirty years ago, in 1978, Israel used for the first time a double-ballot electoral system in its municipal elections. On one ballot the voters were asked to support their preferred candidate for the position of mayor. On the other ballot they were asked to support their preferred list-of-candidates for the municipal council. The system worked quite well on the municipal

level, especially because of proper interference of the Minister of the Interior in most cases where clashes between the mayor and the council occurred.

An attempt to follow the municipal electoral-governmental system and to adopt a double-ballot system on the national level failed. In 1996 and in 1999 Israel had double elections for its parliament – the Knesset, and its prime minister, but both Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, who was elected as prime minister in 1996 and Labour's Ehud Barak, who was elected in 1999, failed to maintain a majority coalition in the Knesset and lost their position. In 2001 Israel held 'special' elections of its prime minister (without having parallel elections of the Knesset). Likud's Ariel Sharon was elected and on the day that he presented his new government to the Knesset he also insisted that the Knesset would change *Basic Law: The Government*, such that Israel will return to a single ballot vote and to a regular parliamentary system.

The relative success of the double-ballot system on the municipal level contradicted its evident failure on the national level. This is only one example of the different lessons that one can be draw from a comparison between

general and local elections in Israel. Thus, while in the Knesset elections of 1977, for the first time in the history of Israel, a right-wing leader, Menachem Begin of the Likud, came to power, Labour came as the winner in the 1978 municipal elections. Furthermore, according to exit polls conducted in the 1978 municipal elections, it seemed that Labour was expected to return to power on the national level as well. But the hopes of the left wing opposition parties to return to power did not materialize, and the following general elections of 1981 ended in another Likud victory. It was proved once and again that 1977 was a turning point. Labour hardly succeeded to return to power and its leaders served as prime ministers only in three occasions: Peres between 1984 and 1986, Rabin (and Peres) between 1992 and 1996, and Barak between 1999 and 2001.

The Turnout of Voters – Arab Local Patriotism vis a vis National Alienation?

There are many reasons for the difference between electoral results on the municipal level and electoral results on the national level. One prominent reason is the level of participation of different segments of the general public in different types of elections. It should also be mentioned that 'permanent residents' who are not Israeli citizens can participate in local elections but cannot participate in general elections.

There is a huge difference between turnout in municipal and national elections. In the 1950s and the 1960s many municipal elections took place on the same day of Knesset elections. Hence, the level of participation in both types of elections was quite similar, and usually, the parties supported on both levels were not much different. In recent years, municipal and national elections are not held on the same date. The turnout in Jewish settlements tends to be much lower in municipal elections (compared to general elections), while turnout in Arab settlements tends to be much higher on the municipal level. This phenomenon can be explained by the deep involvement of most Jewish voters in 'big politics' issues, which are regarded by many as existential. Among Arab voters one may detect a certain degree of alienation on national issues. At the same time, many Arab voters are often deeply involved in local politics that reflect, for example, rivalries between leading extended families ('khamulas') and controversies on local day-to-day issues.

Among Jews, turnout in upper class neighborhoods is much higher than in lower class neighborhoods. While upper class voters tend to support left-of-center parties, lower class voters tend to support right-of-center parties. Thus, the drop in the general turnout in the 1978 municipal elections compared to the 1977 Knesset elections was more acute among the lower strata voters and caused the misleading prediction of the 1978 exit polls.

Such differences in the level of participation occurred again and again, and although the turnout in the last Knesset elections in 2006 dropped to a record low (63.5% compared to the regular 75%+), the turnout in municipal elections is much lower in Jewish settlements. Thus, in Tel Aviv – the second largest city – only 130,189 of the 399,696 of the eligible voters cast valid votes (32.6%). In Haifa, the third largest city, the rate of valid votes of the electorate was 35.3%, in the fourth-largest city, Petakh-Tikvah, the rate was 45.3%, in the fifth-largest city Ashdod it reached a relative peak of 52.8%, in the sixth-largest city, Natanya, it was 39.8%, and in the seventh-largest city and the largest southern city of Israel, Beer-Sheva, it was 38.8%.

The situation is completely opposite in Arab settlements. In the largest Arab city, Nazareth, the rate of valid votes out of the general electorate was 70.4%. In the second-largest Arab city, Um-el-Fakhem, the rate was 77.7%, and in the third-largest Arab settlement, Rahat, it reached 89.3%. In many smaller Arab villages the rate was higher than 90%.

Municipal Elections in Jerusalem – A Secular or a Religious Capital?

In 2008, elections of special interest took place in Israel's capital and largest city, Jerusalem. A very large segment of the Jewish population consists of religious ultra orthodox voters. This

population is usually characterized by a very high turnout.

In Jerusalem there is also a large Arab population. But while Arabs in the settlements mentioned above had been Israeli citizens prior to the 1967 Six-Days war, the Jerusalem Arab population lived under Jordanian rule until 1967. Furthermore, the Arab population of Jerusalem is almost four times as big as it was in 1967. Many Arabs who lived all over the (previously Jordanian) West Bank immigrated to Jerusalem and acquired voting rights in the municipal elections. The Jerusalem Arab population, unlike the 'veteran' Arab population, tends to boycott the elections. In fact, a prominent religious Moslem leader announced in a 'Fatwa' prior to the elections according to which Arabs who participate in the municipal elections deserve a death penalty. Hence, the electoral battle in Jerusalem focused on the race between the Jewish religious and secular voters.

In the 2003 elections, for the first time in its history, Jerusalem elected an ultra-orthodox candidate, Uri Lupolianski of the 'United Torah Judaism', as its mayor. He was supported by 51.6% of the valid votes, compared to 42.7% who supported a non-partisan secular candidate, Nir Barkat. The remaining votes were distributed among four other candidates. Lupolianski enjoyed some support among secular Jews, and succeeded to gain at least a minimal support in every polling station in Jerusalem. Lupolianski's party was the largest in the

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municipal council and with other religious parties he enjoyed a comfortable majority.

In the 2008 elections Meir Porush replaced Lupolianski as the United-Torah-Judaism's candidate. Porush seemed to deter many secular voters. Nir Barkat challenged the ultra orthodox candidate again. It was clear that one of these two would become mayor. The legal requirement is to come first in the race with at least 40% of the valid votes. If no candidate overcomes this threshold, a second round takes place. Only two other candidates participated in the 2008 race and it seemed that the race would be decided in the first round. This time Barkat finished first. He was supported by 52.4% of the valid votes compared to 43.4% that went to Porush. Many believed that Barkat could win only if the turnout is considerably high. In fact, 214,737 of the 527,672 eligible voters cast valid votes (40.7%). In 2003 the rate of valid votes was lower – 36.3%.

Barkat will try to include religious parties in his municipal coalition, not only because of his declaration to be “the mayor of everybody”, but also because he cannot mobilize a majority without such cooperation.

It is interesting to note that the three largest political parties of Israel, Kadima, Labour and Likud, did not even propose a candidate for mayor in Jerusalem. This signifies the weaker stand of national political parties in local politics as well as the decrease in

the popularity of veteran political parties in general.

At the same time it should be remembered that the Jerusalem race was very different than those held in other cities. Thus, in both Tel Aviv and Haifa, the incumbent mayors (Ron Huldai in Tel Aviv and Yonah Yahav in Haifa) won the race. Both of them, although officially leading ‘independent’ lists-of-candidates, are affiliated to the Labour party. Furthermore, the candidate who came second in Tel Aviv with an impressive support of 34.3% was Dov Hanin, who is a Knesset Member representing the communist-led Hadash – a party which is rarely supported by Jewish voters.

Conclusions

While political parties are often disguised as local non-partisan groups in local elections, they do play the major role in Knesset elections. In the 2006 general elections, 12 such parties gained representation in the highly fragmented Knesset. Five right wing and religious parties have occupied 50 seats in the Knesset. This group of parties is led by the 12-seats Likud. The left wing bloc, which is led by the 19-seats Labour, has held 34 seats. The center is occupied by a new party Kadima (29 seats) and the pensioners (7 seats). Kadima (‘forward’) was established by former prime minister Ariel Sharon and other politicians who defected both Likud and Labour.

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According to public opinion polls Labour is expected to suffer a heavy defeat in the February 2009 Knesset elections. The main question to be decided by the voters is whether the right-wing and religious parties will regain a majority in the Knesset. If this bloc fails, Kadima will capture the critical median point of the Knesset. It seems that either Benjamin Netanyahu of Likud or Tsipy Livni of Kadima, will become the next prime minister of Israel. Netanyahu served as prime minister between 1996 and 1999 and later served as minister of foreign affairs and finance minister in Sharon's governments.

Livni, who is the foreign minister of Israel, succeeded prime minister Olmert as leader of Kadima. She served in several other ministerial posts in Sharon's governments. The electoral battle on the center is quite open, but according to the public opinion polls conducted at the time of the municipal elections, Netanyahu seems to lead the race.

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