

Opinions and Commentaries

Religious Revival? With 18 Knesset Seats, Israel's Orthodox Parties Wield Clout

By David Landau

JERUSALEM (JTA)—Three ultra-Orthodox parties and their spiritual mentors seem to hold Israel's political future in their hands following the Knesset elections.

The National Religious Party, Agudat Yisrael and Shas command 16 Knesset seats among them, according to the all-but-final results of the vote.

Two additional religious seats have been won by the new ultra-Orthodox party Degel Hatorah, an Agudat Yisrael breakaway. It remains to be seen whether the fierce personal and doctrinal disputes that caused the split can be resolved.

One thing is clear, however: neither Labor nor Likud can form a government without the religious right.

The religious bloc is considered far more likely to align with the nationalist Likud than with the socialist and strongly secular Labor Party.

The religious parties are expected to drive a hard bargain in the coming weeks, one that may be unpalatable to Likud, some analysts say. Therefore, the possibility of another Labor-Likud unity government can not be ruled out. But at this juncture it seems remote.

The real winners in the elections appear to be Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 85, who supported the Agudat Yisrael ticket from his Chabad Hasidic headquarters in Brooklyn, N.Y.; Rabbi Eliezer Schach, 92, of Bnei Brak, a foe of the Chabad movement and a spiritual guide to both Agudat Yisrael and Shas; and Israel's former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, 70, of Jerusalem.

Moved the Voters

These venerable rabbis inspired, cajoled, encouraged and threatened a large and rapidly growing constituency to show its true strength for the first time. In fact, the stunning rise of the religious vote appears to be the single most salient feature of the election.

Demography and the continued surge of the return-

to-religion movement among Sephardim and Ashkenazim point to further increases in its strength in the future. Such immigration as there is, moreover, is largely Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox.

The various religious parties fought this election with a passion born of schism and factionalism. As it turned out, it made for a higher turnout of religious voters.

By contrast, both Likud and Labor produced a lackluster performance in the balloting. With 99 percent of the vote counted, they held 39 and 38 Knesset seats, respectively, in the 120-seat Israeli parliament.

This was a net loss from the 1984 elections, when they won 41 and 44 seats, respectively.

Parties gain seats proportionate to the percentage of votes won.

Peres Doomed?

Labor's humiliation was especially bitter. As soon as the shock and disappointment over the exit poll results was absorbed, a wave of disaffection swept through the halls of a Tel Aviv hotel where a victory party had been planned.

Its focus was party leader Shimon Peres, the foreign minister and former premier who led Labor to its fourth consecutive defeat.

Peres had built the entire campaign around his record, his achievements and his hopes, to the virtual exclusion of all of the top echelon of the Labor Party, except Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Energy Minister Moshe Shahal, party Secretary-General Uzi Baram and other party leaders all vented their spleen to representatives of the news media the night of the election.

The result was headlines in the morning newspapers such as "Labor Leaders Demand a Soul-Searching — Now!"

Less Displeased

There were celebrations at Likud headquarters. The political arithmetic of the ballot makes the hard-line party the most likely leader of the next government.

Premier Yitzhak Shamir, the Likud leader, emerged as the only man capable of forming a new government. But his joy is by no means unbounded.

His options are to be prime minister of a narrow-based government, in partnership with the ultra-Orthodox and the far right-wing secular parties, or of another broad coalition with Labor.

Both options are fraught with personal, political and ideological difficulties. Shamir's experience as head of a narrow government in 1983 and 1984 left a bitter taste.

At age 73, he would have wished to be spared the need to conduct arduous negotiations with half a dozen extremist parties — extreme rightists and extreme Orthodox — most of which believe correctly that he needs them as much as they need him.

It became clear during the preliminary consultations between Likud and the religious parties that a string of concessions would have to be made on divisive religious issues.

'Who is a Jew'

Foremost is the controversial "Who is a Jew" amendment to the Law of Return. This is not seen as a major pitfall for Likud, since its Herut wing has always supported the Orthodox measure, which would allow automatic Israeli citizenship to Jews by choice only if they have undergone the Orthodox conversion.

Herut and its Liberal Party partners in the Likud presumably can live with that. But passage of the amendment would arouse the fury of the non-Orthodox, who comprise the majority of affiliated Jews in the U.S. and elsewhere overseas.

Herut, presumably, also could accept demands for father government subsidies for the ultra-Orthodox community's educational and welfare institutions.

But the religious parties plainly do not intend to stop there. Dealing, as they see it, from a position of strength, they are expected to demand government enforcement of all kinds of religious customs and

restrictions, such as the closing of movie theaters on the Sabbath.

In the eyes of many secular Israelis of all political persuasions, such measures would constitute a direct assault on their personal freedom.

And from the Right

On the far right, moreover, Shamir can expect constant pressure to abrogate the 1978 Camp David accords, to annex the West Bank and Gaza Strip and to embark on a vast new settlement program in those territories.

The far-right Tsomet party and the NRP also urge the mass expulsion of Palestinian activists as the way to curb the uprising.

Shamir knows well that such an approach would trigger a devastating response from Israel's friends abroad, notably the U.S., regardless of which party would win the presidential elections.

Likud went into the elections cleaving to Camp David, which was the achievement of its longtime revered leader, Menachem Begin. One of its likely coalition partners, the expansionist Tehiya party, fought its election campaign on an anti-Camp David program. Shamir, in fact, voted

against the accord.

The even more extreme Moledet party demands the mass transfer of Arabs from Israel and the administered territories, as part of a negotiated peace settlement. Rabbi Meir Kahane's Kach party was banned from the elections for advocating an immediate transfer of the Arabs, a position the Central Elections Committee deemed racist.

Yet without Moledet's two seats, Shamir's majority would be whittled down to the barest minimum, and his government would be at the mercy of the whims of any one of its components.

Back to 'Unity'?

All of these factors led observers not to rule out another unity coalition with the Labor Party — though one in which Likud clearly would be the dominant partner and Peres would play no role.

Shamir's animosity toward Peres is personal as well as political. Many pundits believe that if Shamir can be rid of Peres, he actually would keep Rabin as defense minister, rather than appoint the powerful and fiercely controversial Herut rival Ariel Sharon, or the even harder-line Tehiya leader, Yuval Ne'eman.

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