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THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS: WHAT NEXT FOR ARIEL SHARON?

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Tuesday's election in Israel gave Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a sweeping victory. But it was not the victory he wanted. The published results left Sharon's Likud Party with 37 seats, double its representation in the previous Knesset. Labor, by contrast lost seven seats and finished with only 19.

This is unquestionably a remarkable achievement for Sharon. In a campaign that stressed his personal leadership – the dominant slogan was "The People Want Sharon" – he became the first incumbent Prime Minister since Menahem Begin to be re-elected by a convincing margin. To some extent, the results reflect a redistribution of votes within the national/religious bloc: much of Likud's gain came at the expense of Shas, the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi party, many of whose voters returned to the Likud fold because the abolition of the law allowing direct election of the Prime Minister prevented voters from splitting their ballot. But the same reason cannot explain the defection of Labor (and Meretz) voters to Shinui, the militantly secularist party which more than doubled its Knesset representation from six to 15. That can more plausibly be attributed to some combination of disillusionment with the peace process and more articulate opposition to the indulgence of ultra-religious parties in government.

Beyond these intra-bloc shifts, however, there was a small but significant shift in the balance between the national/religious and so-called "peace camp"/secularist blocs. As a result, Sharon is technically able now to form a 67-member coalition with Likud's "natural" – because ideologically compatible – partners in the 120 seat Knesset. That option is additional evidence of the magnitude of Sharon's achievement. But it is also precisely why this was the victory he did not want.

Sharon's preference was, and remains, a broader coalition that includes both Labor and Shinui. Aside from the extra stability that such a coalition promises, he wants it in order to provide domestic political coverage even just for tactical flexibility in promoting political initiatives that junior partners in a narrow right-wing government (such as the National Union) will oppose and in rejecting political/military initiatives that those partners will demand. He also wants it in order to shield himself from international criticism.

Such a coalition was always a distant prospect. Despite some dissenting voices within the Party, Labor committed itself not to serve in a Sharon-led Government. And Shinui rejected membership in a coalition that excluded either Likud or Labor but included the ultra-religious

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parties, most especially Shas. Sharon clung (and still clings) to the hope of a much broader National Unity Government that would preclude reliance on smaller right-wing parties. But it is the very magnitude of his victory that makes such a prospect even less likely than before. For one thing, the carrot of something resembling parity with Labor does not exist because of its setbacks and Likud's gains. In light of the election results, Labor would have to enter the coalition as a decidedly junior partner. For another, the very availability of a viable right-wing alternative further diminishes whatever leverage Labor might have had.

In important respects, then, Sharon's victory was too great to serve the larger purposes of governing the way he wants to. Of course, the possibility remains that some *deus ex machina* will impel Labor and Shinui to abrogate their commitments and join a government led by Sharon, or at least to provide the justification for doing so. The most frequently discussed example of such an event would be Israel's implication in a war precipitated by an American attack on Iraq. For that very reason, Sharon has indicated that he is in no hurry to begin the task of assembling a governing coalition and has announced that he will not even enter formal negotiations with anyone for at least a week. It is also likely, after the results are formally proclaimed by the Central Elections Commission and he is officially entrusted with the task by the President of the State, that he will use every minute of the 28-day period and 14-day extension permitted him by law.

Nevertheless, barring some such *deus ex machina*, it is difficult to foresee any agreed outcome except the one least favored by Sharon. In this respect, Sharon's victory is almost too great to be good for him.

Nor does it augur well for his ability to meet the challenges that will certainly face him in the future. These do not only include the familiar list of political problems (dealing with the

Palestinians, dealing with the US Administration and other foreign governments), security problems (dealing with terrorism in ways that are effective but not politically counterproductive), and economic problems (dealing with recession and unemployment through a coalition that constantly requires "election budgets"). They also include growing signs of public alienation from the entire political process, with all that that entails for the vitality of Israeli democracy.

The public turnout for this election was less than 70%, a full 10% below the last two general elections and the lowest for any Knesset election in Israeli history. To some extent, this may be a function of electoral fatigue: this was the third election in four years – itself a symptom of political dysfunction. But it may also signify disillusionment with the entire system, a growing passivity fed by the belief of many non-voters that this kind of election ultimately makes no difference anyway and that real change cannot come without serious electoral reform. Such indifference leaves a clearer field to sectoral and special interests that do remain highly motivated both to participate and to curb the influence of other institutions (e.g., the media, the judiciary) that limit their ability to implement their preferences. But a government hamstrung by multiple partners is precisely the one least able to implement any electoral reform. Moreover, political paralysis may also nourish public support for a "strongman" able to override the normal constraints of democratic politics in order to "do something." In this respect, too, Sharon's victory, was flawed: too great to find partners to address the problem, but not great enough to deal with it by himself.

The full significance of the election can be known, if at all, only after a governing coalition is formed. But it is already clear that Sharon's accomplishment, however great, did not produce the "genuine victory" that he, in his first post-election speech, said he was still seeking.