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THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS: INITIAL REFLECTIONS

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The Israeli national elections held on March 28 did not yield a clear-cut outcome and one should therefore be cautious in drawing conclusions before all the results, including breakdowns by various criteria, have been properly digested, analyzed and understood. However, it is already possible to venture several observations.

The first concerns the low voter turnout – about 64% -- which represents a decrease of 5% from three years ago and is the lowest turnout rate in Israel's history (for Knesset elections). Voter apathy reflects a growing disillusionment with the current political parties in particular and with the political process in general. This disillusionment was also demonstrated in the surprise of the election – the astonishing achievement of the Pensioners' Party, which won seven seats (more than half of the seats won by the Likud). The support for this party, whose political platform and candidates were totally unknown to the Israeli electorate, can only be seen as a massive protest vote against all the political parties represented in the outgoing Knesset. Indeed, the party's remarkable and totally unpredicted success may well be attributed precisely to the fact that it was not represented in the previous Knesset and that its candidates were not politicians. At the same

time, it should be noted that growing voter apathy, especially among young age groups, is endemic in Western democracies and thus may be a sign – albeit not a positive one – of a growing normalcy in the Israeli political environment. Given improved security and an upbeat economy, many Israelis saw no real threat and felt that they could stay home or vote for the Pensioners' Party.

As for the results themselves, two key observations are in order. First of all, there has been a clear short-term shift in the balance of power from center-right to center-left. The right-religious bloc has dropped from 69 seats to 50 seats – a loss of over twenty five percent. The center-left bloc, including the Arab parties, controls 63 seats, with the remaining seven going to the new Pensioners' Party. The political leanings of this party remain a mystery, although there is reason to believe that it, or at least a majority of its Knesset members, lean towards the center-left bloc. If so, that would effectively give the bloc a total of 70 seats. No less important, the center-left bloc, assuming the support of the Pensioners' Party, has 60 seats even without the Arab parties. Not since before the first Likud victory in 1977 has the center-left bloc been in such a strong position. The

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significance of these numbers is that Kadima Leader Ehud Olmert can muster a majority in the Knesset for his convergence plan even if the Arab parties (which together have ten seats) abstain. Nevertheless, the victory of Olmert, Kadima and the center-left bloc is far from a landslide, and the results remain subject to different interpretations.

In the long-term point of view, however, there are two contradictory trends, both of which may have far-reaching ramifications and consequences for Israeli politics and for Israeli society. On the one hand, we see an electorate far less ideological and more pragmatic. At the same, however, we have also seen a sharp increase in sectarianism.

These elections reflect the demise of the ideological parties. Meretz on the left and the National Union-National Religious Party on the right suffered losses at the polls, and the Likud was all but demolished. Many have termed these elections "the death of ideology." It would seem that the Israeli voter has freed himself at last from a binding commitment to a given party – be it because of ideology or a "label." Party loyalty has been greatly weakened and there may well be wide-ranging shifts in future voting patterns, reflecting a more pragmatic and situation-dependent approach on the part of the Israeli electorate.

Indeed, perhaps the most dramatic and obvious result of this election is the complete redrawing of the political map compared to that of three years ago. Kadima, a party which did not exist six months ago, received the votes of almost one out of every four Israelis and is now the largest party in the Knesset, with 29 seats. Shinui, a party which had won 15 seats in 2003 and had over 300,000 votes, vanished into thin air. The Likud lost close to 75% of its votes and went from 38 seats in 2003 (making it the largest

party, twice as big as Labor) to just 12 seats, by far its worst showing ever. All in all, only 17% of the voters (according to one exit poll) voted this time for the same party they had voted for in the previous elections. In short, political parties and their leaders can no longer take the loyalty of their voters for granted.

Many had expected that the reconfiguration of Israeli politics would produce a strong center party – Kadima – which would be able, with relative ease, to form a strong and stable coalition government which could implement clear-cut and far-reaching political, diplomatic and economic policies. This expectation did not fully materialize. Instead, there has been a remarkable rise in the support for sectarian parties. Shas, United Torah Judaism, and especially the Russian immigrants' party of Avigdor Lieberman made strong gains, and the Pensioners' Party – a classic special interest party – is the great surprise of the elections. The Arab parties and the National Union-NRP are also, for all intents and purposes, sectarian parties. One single number can tell the whole story. The three major parties which presented candidates for Prime Minister – Kadima, Labor and Likud -- altogether could muster only 60 seats. This is the first time in Israel's history that the three largest parties together are unable, even hypothetically, to form a government.

Ehud Olmert now faces the formidable task of putting together a stable coalition in a Knesset in which twelve parties are represented but none is truly dominant. And Israel as a whole will have to grapple with the consequences of growing sectarianism, with all the inherent dangers that poses for a healthy democracy and a strong cohesive society.

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