



türkiye ekonomi politikaları araştırma vakfı

Results of the Israeli Elections: Peace Supporters are Losing Power in the Knesset

February 12, 2009
Neslihan Kaptanoğlu

**Economic Policy
Research Foundation
of Turkey**

The Israeli elections held on February 10, 2009 in the shadow of the Gaza crisis further complicated the leadership problem in the Middle East rather than solving it. The majority from the previous elections of 2009, supporting a two-state solution, was replaced with a majority putting less emphasis on Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The early elections had come on the agenda following the resignation of the former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert upon the corruption claims against him. On September 17, 2008 the Kadima Party held a leadership election with Tzipni Livni emerging victorious following Olmert's resignation as the party leader and Prime Minister. Livni was granted six weeks to form a new coalition government. After the deadline, even though Livni managed to reach an agreement with the Labor Party, she failed to settle with the Ultra-Orthodox Shas Party announcing that she failed in forming a coalition government. These developments gave way to early elections in Israel.

Election Results

In the 2009 elections, Livni and her party Kadima won 28 seats in the 120-seat Israeli Knesset, the most seats of any single party. Second and third places were won by the parties representing the center-right and right wing. Likud Party led by Benjamin Netanyahu, a former Prime Minister came in second with only one less seat than Kadima, 27. Perhaps the most discussed party of the election campaign, the nationalist "Israel Is Our Home" (Yisrael Beiteinu) party and its leader Avigdor Lieberman came in third. The Labor Party, headed by Defense Minister Ehud Barak ranked fourth. This was a big defeat for the Labor Party, a party that has played a central role in Israeli politics from the state's inception.

Results of Israel Elections: Peace Supporters are Losing Power in the Knesset

Meretz, one of the secular left wing parties, got only 3 % of the votes and won only 3 seats in the Knesset despite the efforts to attract young voters via its online campaign. They even recruited two of U.S. President Barack Obama's election campaigners in order to assure a similar online success. It was observed that young Israelis mostly voted in favor of Lieberman's party.¹ On the other hand, other extreme right wing parties that ran in the elections had quite bad results. The United Torah Judaism Party won only five seats. National Union won four and Jewish Home won three seats. The Gil Party and the Green Movement only won 1 % of the total votes, failing to meet the electoral threshold and therefore losing the right to be represented in the Knesset.

The results, as compared with the previous elections, show that the parties closer to the center-left and left lost ground while center-right, ultra-orthodox and nationalist parties gained power in the new assembly.

Allocation of Seats as per 2009 (First table) and 2006 (Second Table) Election Results²

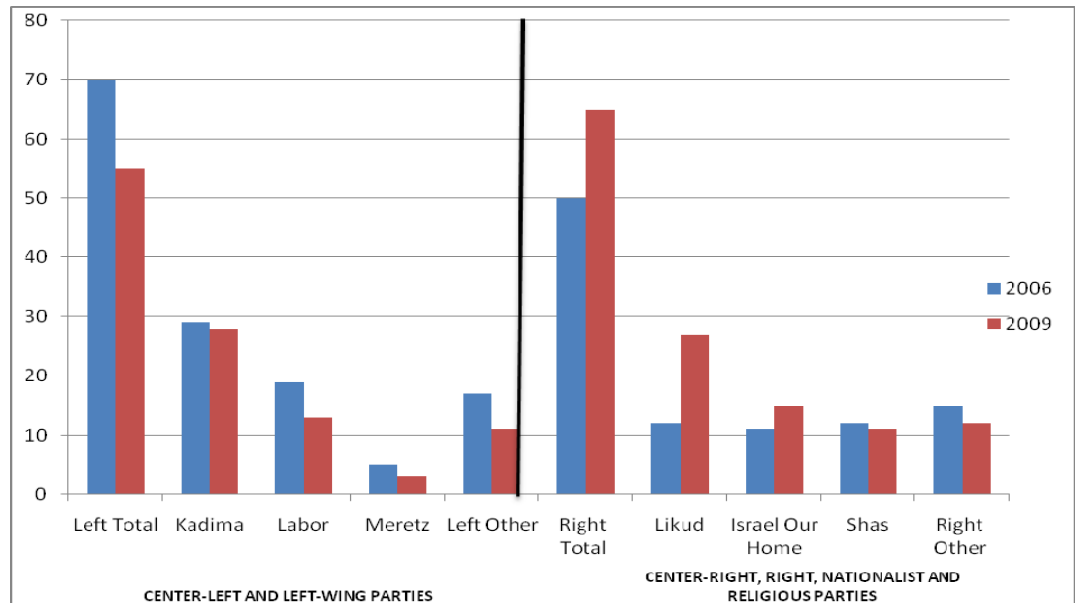
Center-right , Nationalist and Religious Parties	Number of Seats	Center-Left and Left Wing Parties	Number of Seats
Likud	27	Kadima	28
Israel Is Our Home (Yisrael Beiteinu)	15	Labor Party	13
National Union (Ichud Leumi)	4	Meretz	3
Jewish Home	3	United Arab List - Ta'al	4
Shas	11	Balad	3
United Torah Judaism	5	Hadash	4
Total	65	Total	55

Center-right, Nationalist and Religious Parties	Number of Seats	Center and Left Wing Parties	Number of Seats
Likud	12	Kadima	29
Shas	12	Labor Party-Meimad	19
Israel Is Our Home (Yisrael Beiteinu)	11	Gil	7
National Union – National Religion Party	9	Meretz	5
United Torah Judaism	6	United Arab List	4
		Hadash	3
		Balad	3
Total	50	Total	70

¹ Haaretz, "Lieberman's anti-Arab ideology wins over Israel's teens", 07.02.2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1061910.html>

² Knesset web site, http://www.knesset.gov.il/elections17/eng/Results/main_results_eng.asp, Haaretz web site <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1061917.html>

Results of Israel Elections: Peace Supporters are Losing Power in the Knesset



The proximity of the voting results for the Kadima Party and Likud Party show that the negotiations to form a coalition government will not be easy. According to the election procedure, Israeli President Shimon Peres has to consult with the leader of each party that passed the election threshold to receive their opinions on who they would like to see as the new prime minister. The task of forming the government will be assigned to the member proposed by the majority of the party leaders. Peres will make a series of visits to hear the opinions of the party leaders and will announce the member that is assigned the task to form the coalition government around February 20.

A coalition government can be formed if the support of at least 61 of the members is guaranteed. Israeli experts believe that Netanyahu has a higher chance to guaranteeing this number than Livni. The main reason behind this estimation is that the third and the key party “Israel Is Our Home” stands closer to the Likud Party ideologically than to Kadima Party. Like Likud, “Israel Is Our Home” argues that the ceasefire settlement should not be reached with Hamas under the context of the Gaza operations and that military operations to destroy Hamas shall be continued. One of the party’s most shocking and repulsive stances is their argument that Arab-Israeli citizens need to be subjected to “loyalty” test to preserve their Israeli citizenship and that the citizens that do not respect presence of Israel on top of anything else shall be deprived of Israeli citizenship. During his election campaign, Netanyahu expressed that he supports the loyalty prerequisite for citizenship argued by Lieberman. Should Likud lead the coalition as is likely, it is predicted that a member of the “Israel Is Our Home Party” will the

Results of Israel Elections: Peace Supporters are Losing Power in the Knesset

Finance Ministry. Livni on the other hand emphasizes two issues crucial for Lieberman in order to attract him to his side. First is eliminating the barriers to civil marriage for couples who are forbidden from religious marriage and the second is changing the system of government. It is argued that, even though Lieberman has said he is open to forming a government with either Kadima or Likud, it is well-known that his ideological leanings lie much closer to Netanyahu.

The estimations of experts reveal that a coalition to be formed by center-right, right wing, ultra-Orthodox/nationalist parties will comprise 63-65 seats while a coalition to be formed by more center-left and left wing parties will comprise 55-57 seats. Some of the Arab parties from the left wing, which are represented with 9-10 seats in the Knesset, have already announced that they will propose neither Netanyahu nor Livni as the new Prime Minister. Under these circumstances, the attitudes of the Labor Party that won the fourth position and the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party that won the fifth position become vital. Members of the Labor Party lean more towards a coalition to be formed with Kadima. However, these estimations are built on sensitive balances. It is discussed that if Livni decides to include Lieberman within its coalition, the Labor Party and Meretz will automatically withdraw their support in return.

On the other hand, the leanings of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party are not certain. During the election campaign, Shas Party spiritual leader Ovadia Yosef declared a war against the "Israel Is Our Home" party and claimed that voting for that party means voting for the devil. Shas leader Eli Yishai has launched attempts to ally with the United Torah Judaism to gain ground in the coalition negotiations. As it is considered that the main reason behind the failure of Livni to form a coalition in September 2008 was the conflict with the Shas party, it is estimated that Shas would prefer to support Likud headed by Netanyahu rather than Kadima headed by Livni. As a last probability, even if Likud and Kadima decide to take place in the same coalition, they have to settle with extreme religious or extreme right wing parties to reach the absolute majority of 61 seats. This, under any case, implies that the majority supporting a two-state solution has lost power as compared to the previous elections.

These results indicate that Israel, who is increasingly getting subject to more criticisms because of the unwanted civilian deaths during the recent Gaza operations, is day by day becoming more indignant to outside pressure resulting in the strengthening of

Results of Israel Elections: Peace Supporters are Losing Power in the Knesset

nationalist tendencies within the country. After the Oslo process, a majority supporting a two-state solution and Israeli-Palestinian peace was created in Israel; however, such majority could not have been created in Palestine due to the political state of affairs in the country, divisions on the Palestinian side and the failure in involving Hamas in the process. In a contrary manner, just when diverse voices of integrating Hamas into the process is heard more clearly, the majority advocating a two-state solution within Israel is now losing ground.