



SPECIAL REPORT: WHICH WAY NOW FOR ISRAELI POLITICS?

ISRAEL'S SILENT MAJORITY FINALLY FINDS ITS VOICE

Last week, Yair Lapid emerged as the king-maker of Israeli politics. Stephen Oryszczuk in Jerusalem asks: what does the election result mean for Benjamin Netanyahu's political future?

Israel is home to one of the highest concentrations of journalists anywhere in the world, and for good reason: a lot happens here. Last week, for example, Israel held an election, issued new birth control guidelines, moved its Iron Dome missile defence system, put the details to a defence pact with India, convicted paedophiles in Jerusalem, approved a landmark Bedouin settlement policy, detected 'significant' brain activity in Ariel Sharon and televised its first 'trans-inclusive' wedding (when a man takes as his bride a woman who was once a man, apparently).

By contrast, Iran put a monkey in a rocket, declaring it to be the 'first great step towards man conquering space.' There are fewer journalists in Tehran...

But with such high concentrations of commentary, there can be 'analysis paralysis,' leaving more questions than answers. A week after elections, however, the prevalent themes are at least becoming clear, presenting three million-shekel questions.

The first is who will lead Israel. It looks highly likely to be Benjamin Netanyahu, despite loose talk to the contrary. The coalition partners he takes, however, will determine his direction on a range of issues, including peace talks with the Palestinians and laws that touch on Israel's religious-secular divide. So who will join the government?

Likud-Beiteinu only managed 31 seats between them, and in a 120-seat Knesset, this means they now need to double their number. Their natural allies, including Jewish Home (12 seats), Shas (11) and United Torah Judaism (seven), managed to scrape together 30 seats. Technically this is enough for Netanyahu to form a right-wing religious coalition, but that would mean ignoring Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid party, which swept to second place with 19 seats. Most think the prime minister cannot afford to do so.

"Netanyahu would not turn his back on the will of the majority," says Dr Ofir Kenig of the Israel Democracy Institute, echoing the thoughts of others.

Marcus Sheff of The Israel Project agrees: "It's highly likely Lapid will join the government. He represents more than a political party – he represents a social movement that Netanyahu is listening to closely."

If Netanyahu has to choose, the pragmatic and enigmatic Mr Lapid may be a more attractive option than Naftali Bennett's 12-seat Jewish Home for two other reasons. Despite being from the same ideological stable, Bennett and Netanyahu have history (Bennett ran foul of his former boss' wife).

Additionally, the settler leader's messianic aversion to a Palestinian state would mean Netanyahu having to fight even harder for international understanding. Lapid (with his centrism and his 19 seats) may therefore be a better 'fit.'

This leads to the second big question: how will all this affect Israel? More so than the peace process or foreign policy, the 'social movement' Sheff refers to seems to have decided the election. As such, the new-look coalition's impact will likely be felt at home more than abroad.

Professor Dan Avnon, political theorist at Hebrew University, explains: "Israel's silent majority has said it wants a sense of normalcy – a government that will address the needs of normal middle-class workers."

Economic concerns, such as the lack of



The new face of Israeli politics: Yair Lapid greets supporters after last week's election.
Inset: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman

soon. Both Bennett and Lapid think the Charedim should serve, and analysts say the ultra-Orthodox may have seen the writing on the wall. "The two ultra-Orthodox parties share a concern here," says Professor Avnon. "The question is whether they hold hands and jointly refuse to enter a coalition that aims to change the status quo, or whether they take different positions. At the moment Shas seems more open to compromise."

Yet there is more at stake than the military duties of religious students. "The election shows that the secular middle class is fed up with subsidising the ultra-Orthodox not to work," says Dr Toby Greene of Britain-Israel Communications Research Centre (BICOM). "The ultra-Orthodox parties must surely realise that the status quo is unsustainable."

The divide goes deeper than taxes and civic duties, says Shmuel Jakobovits, an ultra-Orthodox rabbi who runs the Torah Institute of Contemporary Issues in Jerusalem. "The underlying issue is that there's an ideological contest over the soul of the state of Israel and the Jewish people," he said.

Lapid agrees, and sees it as a battleground. Speaking to a group of religious students in 2011, the future Yesh Atid leader said that in a century-long competition to define Israel's character, "we lost and you won."

Should the ultra-Orthodox find no place in the next coalition, it would lead to a "government of the state of Tel Aviv," according to Aryeh Deri of

Shas. But the voters have shifted the balance, says Dr Kenig, arguing: "We have to see the 'religious' representation in the new Knesset with new eyes. For the first time in decades, there are more national-religious MKs than Charedi MKs."

This new balance may or may not lead to a more pragmatic government. Lapid has already said he favours re-engaging with the Palestinian Authority, in an effort to find a suitable solution to the decades-old conflict, and this leads to the third big question: will the new government help revive a dying peace process?

"It depends on the Palestinians," says Sheff, pointing out that Netanyahu remains engaged if the pre-conditions imposed by Mahmoud Abbas are dropped. But others are less convinced. Former minister and veteran peace activist Yossi Beilin recently challenged Netanyahu's sincerity, saying: "You say you support a peaceful solution, and now you have a majority of 108 members of Knesset who agree with you. Show that you are ready to understand the international situation!"

All the while, Netanyahu is focused on other matters, including the latest deterioration in Syria and the subsequent security (or otherwise) of President Assad's stockpile of chemical weapons.

"The Middle East doesn't wait for election results and coalition politics," warned the prime minister. As he did, Israel's throng of journalists set about plotting and penning his political future.

• Editorial comment, page 10

affordable housing, are indeed squeezing a restless middle class and are a high-priority item. But these have combined with combustible social concerns, with Avnon's middle class angry that the Charedim do not pull their weight. The hugely unpopular draft exemption, which currently allows up to 60,000 ultra-Orthodox students to study the Torah instead of serve in the army, is their high-profile lightning rod.

Enter the unashamedly secular Lapid. Last year, the exemption was ruled unconstitutional, but with ultra-Orthodox coalition partners in government, Netanyahu side-stepped a decision, despite protests in the streets. However, Lapid has made himself the front-line in the domestic battle being waged between the secular and the religious in the Jewish homeland, and has 19 seats to show for it. He made the draft exemption his core concern in the election. Change on this particular issue should come

Election word on the street...

"Like most people, I think these elections were surprising. Lapid was a default vote because people didn't want to vote for Netanyahu, but I was surprised how many votes he got. I think he will be in the next government. Orthodox parties will also be in the government, but they come with a huge load and will have to share the burden with the rest of us in taxes, the civil service and so on. I don't think this government will last the full term, but I truly hope Lapid will make it feasible."



Eran Lieber
Age: 38
IT engineer
Lives in Tel Aviv

"I woke up on the morning after the election feeling extremely confused. Yes, we want to reduce the extreme right. And yes, we want to strengthen the moderates. But now, after all the votes have been counted, we don't have anything like a clear winner. Does it mean we will now get a fairer society? Does it mean the Palestinians will now come to talk to us? I don't know. I only hope it helps end the current impasse."



Moshe Hyman
Age: 66
Retired (originally from Wales)

"The public thinks the country needs a new agenda. We support a two-state solution and want radicals on both sides out of the game. We want to see the state headed by Netanyahu, but led by moderate forces in society. We want to see equality, regardless of the religious beliefs and ethnic origin of citizens. We want to see the ultra-Orthodox community serving in the IDF, together with the rest and we want to put the religion outside the politics. In summary: new agenda, new hope."



David Gurevich
Age: 32
Archaeology student, Haifa

"I was really disappointed as I was hoping for a stronger Likud. I'm pleased Netanyahu won, but also think he made a big mistake not having a proper campaign. He said nothing about his future plans. Had Likud been more straight-talking, it would have at least four more seats. But it's not all bad. There is now a real opportunity for a government without ultra-Orthodox Jews. That would do wonders for our country."



Idan Zak
Age: 25
Student from Haifa

"I'm afraid of what will happen next. Yesh Atid has not really said what it represents. It's a very dangerous political game. On the other hand, I'm happy Netanyahu got so few votes. Now he will have to compromise. The Israeli people are very divided, but also many feel we need change, and this is what motivated the public in this election. I voted Labour as I believe we need to remind ourselves about our country's roots."



Lotem Robins
Age: 25
Student

"The result indicates that young people are waking up. For the past decade, they turned their backs on elections, and people thought nothing could reverse the right-wing trends taking hold. But after the massive demonstrations for social justice in 2011, they responded in this election, because they are desperate for change. They obviously weren't susceptible to the fear mongering of the Likud-Lieberman campaign."



Zelda Harris
Age: 82
School volunteer from Jerusalem

"Netanyahu had a false sense of confidence, and he made some bad mistakes. He combined his party with Lieberman's, when he'd have got more votes separately. Also, the extreme right defected to Bennett, whereas moderate Likudniks voted for one of the centre-left parties. In past elections, turnout by the young left-leaning public was low, while among the religious and right-leaning public it was higher. This year, the overall turnout was much higher."



Leah Morris
Age: 71
Retired from Tel Aviv

"Israeli democracy is to western democracy what margarine is to butter. It may look, smell and taste the same, but it's not the real thing. Israel is an oligarchy, controlled by a few families who own the means of production and distribution and the levers of power in the courts, police, media and anything else that counts. Whoever is elected will do their bidding willingly. My heart breaks for Jews who have a genetic longing for self-destruction."



Rachel and Moshe Saperstein
Ages: Both 72
Former Gaza settlers now living in Nitzan refugee camp



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LITTLE HAS CHANGED IN 12 YEARS

IN AN OBSCURE Jerusalem back street, there is an Israeli kosher restaurant called El Gaucho, serving South American food, writes Stephen Oryszczuk.

Beside the bar, on the wall and in a frame, is the front page of the *Jewish News* dated 9 June 2000. Back then, we were called the *London Jewish News* (to some of our more habituated readers, we still are) and this 12-year-old print is still proudly displayed here because all those years ago we covered a controversy or other regarding the opening of the "new" El Gaucho restaurant in Golders Green. Something about it not serving hindquarter meat...

Next to this kosher kerfuffle, we covered the visit to London that week of one Shaul Mofaz – then Israel's most senior soldier, now leader of the ill-favoured Kadima. He was speaking at the scholarship dinner of the Israeli Ex-Servicemen's Education Fund at Claridges.

The then and now comparisons – especially after election week in Israel – were so staggering that they jumped off the page and knocked me off my bar stool. They're also worth sharing.



Our front page on 9 June 2000

Jews are freed."

And what was Cook's response? "We feel that engagement is far preferable to isolation." The article ends casually by saying that President Bill Clinton has just announced he is to preside over a summit meeting next week between Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

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