

ISRAEL'S ELECTION RESULTS: DISAPPOINTMENT MIXED WITH PROMISE

by Yehezkel Landau

I am writing from Moshav Kfar Yehezkel in Israel's Jezrael Valley. I came to Israel from the U.S. for two weeks in order to spend time with family and friends and to vote in last week's national election. This was the first time I was able to cast my vote in Israel since I moved back to the U.S. from Jerusalem in 2002. It seemed to me an obligation to do what I could to effect a change in government here. In less than 100 days, Binyamin Netanyahu (referred to by all as "Bibi") will surpass David Ben-Gurion as this country's longest-serving prime minister. Many citizens feel that he has overstayed his welcome, especially with at least three pending criminal indictments. For the first time in years, an opposition party led by three former generals and a former TV talk show host offered the electorate a serious center-left alternative to the ruling Likud and its right-wing allies. On election night last Tuesday, it even seemed that the new Blue and White Party stood a chance of prevailing, or at least winning more of the 120 Knesset seats than Netanyahu's Likud Party. At 10 pm, when the voting ended, computer models based on exit polls showed Blue and White with an advantage of up to four seats (37 to 33 in the most optimistic model, as seen from the center and left). I had cast my own vote that morning for this new party, even though my humanistic values were aligned more with the left-wing Meretz Party, which promotes peace and inclusive human rights. (In fact, the ability of Meretz to cross the electoral threshold of 3.25% and remain in the Knesset was due to the support it received from Israeli Arab voters). Many other left-of-center voters made this politically strategic decision in order to defeat Netanyahu and elect a new prime minister. This effort ultimately failed, but the initial reports after the polls closed caused the leader of Blue and White, former army chief of staff Benny Gantz, to deliver a victory speech at his party's headquarters. When the official vote counts started coming in less than an hour later, it became clear that this claim of victory was premature and sadly incorrect. (There was an image that went viral on Israeli social media later that night, a framed portrait of Gantz, with this caption in Hebrew: "Benny Gantz, Israeli Prime Minister 2019, from 10:00 to 10:30 p.m.") Netanyahu gave his own, more credible, victory speech after 1 a.m. By then it had become clear that he could once again cobble together a right-wing coalition made up of secular nationalist and Orthodox religious parties.

Even though pre-election polls had predicted such an outcome, the near-victory of Gantz and his political partners created a sense of "it almost happened" among Israelis who fervently wished for a sea change, in both personalities and policies. As I watched the pundits analyze the results on the three main TV networks, I was increasingly frustrated and angered by the absence of any Arab voice among these political commentators. Not one. It was Jews talking with and to other Jews. This seemed to confirm and reinforce what I heard from Arab friends and colleagues: they felt invisible, totally marginalized politically and excluded from the national conversation. I knew that they were angry at the passage last July of the Nationality Law, declaring that Israel is a state for the Jewish People only and downgrading Arabic from its status as a second official language. I thought that this collective insult, an anti-democratic outrage, would motivate enough Israeli Arabs, or Palestinian Israelis, to vote in large enough numbers to help oust the present right-wing, nationalist government. Instead, only some 50% of eligible Arab voters exercised their democratic right to elect representatives who served their interests. The other half stayed home, helping to ensure Netanyahu's re-election. One of the reasons for this low

Arab turnout was the stunt (in American terms, a “dirty trick”) pulled by Bibi and the Likud on Election Day: supplying tiny cameras to hundreds of Likud observers at polling stations in Arab towns and villages, which were meant to record the goings-on in those venues. In a Machiavellian move—one of many that characterized Netanyahu’s campaign—these illegal cameras were intentionally revealed, resulting in national news reports about them in the early hours of the election. Netanyahu publicly acknowledged that his Likud Party was responsible for this unprecedented action (costing tens of thousands of dollars), claiming that it was done to prevent election fraud. For Americans familiar with Trump’s antics and those of Republican leaders at the state level, this bogus claim has a familiar ring to it. As in the U.S., there is no significant voter fraud in Israel. The decision to deploy the cameras in Arab locations, and then to ensure that the public knew about it, contributed to intimidating would-be Arab voters and letting Jewish nationalists know that the Likud had their back in the ongoing struggle against the perceived “existential enemy.” In effect, this was the 2019 parallel to Bibi’s 2015 statement, made also on Election Day, that “the Arabs are going to the polls in multitudes,” a statement aimed at motivating right-wing Jews to vote.

Netanyahu now faces the challenge of forming a new stable coalition. He has managed to do this several times, and this round should not be too difficult for him. The end result will be another right-wing government composed of both secular and religious parties. Any prospects for peace negotiations with our Palestinian neighbors, never very realistic since the eruption of the Second Intifada in 2000, are even more unlikely. And what of the oft-trumpeted Trump/Kushner peace deal in the making? I hold out little hope for any positive result there, either. Instead, it may boomerang, especially if the Palestinians feel even more marginalized and humiliated by its terms than they already do.

But I do not want to end on a hopeless note, even though despair is an understandable response to the ongoing situation here. Even as the macro-political arena is contaminated by the kind of tribalism that is also undermining American democracy, some very encouraging developments are happening at the grassroots level. Jews and Arabs are working together to build bridges of mutual understanding and cooperation. For example, on March 29 an annual Climate March was held in Tel Aviv. When it was first organized five years ago, some 200 people took part. This year over 5,000 people marched, Arabs and Jews from all over Israel. They carried banners proclaiming mutual solidarity in the face of environmental threats and the need to work together to ensure a common future. This is just one of many such joint activities. Clearly both national communities need to work in concert in order to change the fear-based consciousness which nationalist politicians everywhere are exploiting to hold onto power. Language that demonizes opponents and stokes animosity, whether in America, Israel, or other liberal democracies, poisons the collective psyche and undermines democratic norms. In order to detoxify the discourse and shift the negative energy field, we need to mobilize at the grassroots level with a strategic vision and an effective tactical playbook to make sure that Election Day brings the changes that are needed. In the U.S., the November 2020 date is fixed. In Israel, even though the next government is theoretically elected for four years, the next election may come sooner if Netanyahu is formally indicted on the criminal charges now hanging over his head. His coalition partners, even some fellow Likud members, may not want to have such a tainted leader at the helm. Time will tell. Meanwhile, much work needs to be done. As a citizen of both Israel and the United States, I sense that the immediate future in both my countries will be full of emotional and practical challenges, but that the long-term prospects in both cases are far more promising than present circumstances would suggest. As a religious Jew, I would add: *im yirtzeh Hashem*, if God so wills. And in Arabic: *insha’Allah*.