

# **Electoral Reforms in Israel : A Case Study of Direct Election of Prime Minister**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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2002



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Date: 17 July 2002

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “ELECTORAL REFORMS IN ISRAEL : A CASE STUDY OF DIRECT ELECTION OF PRIME MINISTER” submitted by BHUPENDRA KUMAR SINGH in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY has not been previously submitted for any degree of this or any other University and this is his own work.

We recommend that dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation

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## *Acknowledgements*

*I am immensely grateful to my Supervisor Dr. P.R. Kumaraswamy for his invaluable suggestions and constant encouragement for completion of this work, without his help my dream for dissertation may have become the day dream.*

*I am extending my heartiest gratitude to the authorities of J.N.U. Library, IDSA Library, New Delhi whose constant help gave the final shape to my work.*

*I am also thankful to all the faculty members of the CWAAS, SIS, JNU, New Delhi for their support and inspiration to do meaningful research.*



**(BHUPENDRA KUMAR SINGH)**  
*JNU, New Delhi*

*Dedicated*  
*to*  
*My Parents and the Teachers*

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

Israeli society is a plural society.<sup>1</sup> It is divided along religious, ideological, cultural and ethnic lines. The main internal divisions are in terms of cleavages between Jews and Arabs, observant and non-observant Jews and oriental Jews and occidental Jews. Israeli primarily, the Jewish society, is still a community of immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Thus in a so diverse society where many are in minority, it is essential that each group should have equal opportunity of representation. The existing system of representation in the world, where mere majority election exists, cannot be the real basis of democracy. In a real and equal democracy, every section would be represented, not disproportionately, but proportionately. Given the importance of providing some representation for minorities, proportional representation is one of the methods available to meet the problem of minority representation.

The advocates of the proportional system like J.S. Mill praise it for its mathematical accuracy in reflecting popular opinion and consider it the most democratic and just method of election. The Parliament in this way

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<sup>1</sup> A. Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarianism and Consensus Government in Twenty one Countries*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Itzhak Galnoor, 'The Israeli Political System, A Profile' in Kyle and Joel Peters (ed.), *Whither Israel? The Domestic Challenges*, London, Touris & Co. p. 88.

becomes a mirror of the opinion of all the people. It gives minorities a sense of security and political contentment.<sup>3</sup> It also counteracts the effects of fairness, that is, the problem of wasted votes. Hence, in the so diverse Israeli society, proportional representation is the most suitable method. That is why Israel has adopted the proportional representation system.

In the language of the Basic law of the *Knesset* (the Israeli parliament), Israel's elections are national, direct, equal, secret and proportional.<sup>4</sup> They are national in the that the entire country constitutes a single electoral constituency; 'direct' because voting takes place for the *Knesset* itself, not for representatives or for an electoral college; 'equal' because every citizen has only one vote; 'secret' since no body can see or discover how anyone has voted; and 'proportional' means that a citizen does not vote for an individual candidate but for a party. Total number of seats in the *Knesset* is 120. There is an electoral threshold of 1.5 percent (earlier it was one percent) of the votes cast.

According to Lijphart "Especially in a plural society, society that is sharply divided along religious, ideological, linguistic cultural, ethnic or racial lines into virtually separate sub societies with their own political parties, interest group and media of communication the flexibility

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<sup>3</sup> Anupchand Kapoor, *Principles of Political Science*, New Delhi, S.Chand and Company Limited, 1984, p.445.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Stelman, 'Electing a prime minister and Parliament: The Israeli Election 1996', in *Parliamentary Affairs*, # 49(4), October 96, pp.648-649.



necessary for majoritarian democracy is absent under these conditions, majority rule is not only undemocratic but also dangerous because minorities that are continually denied access to power will feel excluded and discriminated against and will lose their allegiance to the regime. Thus participation in the coalition formulation process is crucial to political stability for without it the integration needed to maintain a liberal democratic social order can not be achieved.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in Israel, coalition government is a dominant factor. If we analyse the various results starting from the first *Knesset* election in 1949 up to the last election in 1999, we can see that no single party secured the magic number of 61 that would give it a simple majority in the 120 member *Knesset*. Therefore, they had to depend on coalition.

However, as it was predicted that coalition formation would give stability of the government it never happened and always, instability persisted. Up to the 15<sup>th</sup> *Knesset* Israel had 30 coalition governments. The *Knesset* term is of four years and each *Knesset* had an average of two coalition governments. Only the national unity government of Golda Meir (1969-74) and Menachem Begin's first government (1977-81) completed their four-year term. It clearly shows that the coalition governments were unstable. In coalition, various parties having different agenda and

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<sup>5</sup> A. Lijphart, *Democracies : Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Governments in Twenty-one Countries*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984, p.22.

ideologies have to be accommodated which is not a healthy sign for stability. It also obstructs the development and differences on any policy would lead to crisis, that is, fall of the governments. The national unity government consisted of both the major parties. Hence, it was supposed that the government would be stable but it did not happen so.

The worst was the case of the National Unity Government (1984 to 1990) when both Labour and Likud buried their differences, forged an inevitable alliance and formed a unity government.<sup>6</sup> The 1984 election for 11<sup>th</sup> *Knesset*, the Labour alignment won 44 seats while Likud gained 41 in the *Knesset*. The balance of power lay with the minority parties, which won the remaining 35 seats in the 120-member *Knesset*. After an agreement a National unity government (NUG) was formed. The agreement was that Shimon Peres the leader of the Labour Alignment would be the prime minister and Yitzhak Shamir-the leader of Likud as Foreign Minister and Deputy prime minister for the first 25 months. Afterwards both would swap their positions. There would be a 25-member Cabinet with 10 ministers -- five each from Labour and Likud forming the inner Cabinet.

Groups who had different ideologies were forced to coexist. For example, Likud is rightist while Labour is Leftist. During Peres's prime ministership Yitzhak Modai of Likud was the Finance Minister who

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<sup>6</sup> Efraim Karsh, *From Rabin to Netanyahu, Israel's Troubled Agenda*, London, Frank Cass, 1997.

criticised Peres for his non-understanding of economics. Peres demanded Modai's resignation but Likud members of the Cabinet threatened to resign en masse.<sup>7</sup>

In 1988 Knesset election Likud won 40 seats and labour 39 seats. So there was a very narrow margin difference. At this juncture both Likud and labour from the National Unity Government.

On 11 March 1990, Shimon Peres and five Labour colleagues withdrew from a cabinet meeting in protest at further delays to a proposed vote on US plans for talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Two days later Prime Minister dismissed Peres, the labour leader and Minister of Finance from the government, prompting the resignation of all the Labour ministers. On 15 March, the Labour joined the opposition and the *Knesset* passed a vote of no confidence against the government.

On 20 March, President Chaim Herzog invited Peres to form a new coalition government after the latter received assurances of the support from five MKs belonging to ultra-orthodox *Augudat Israel*. A two-month period of political wrangling ensued, however, during which both Likud and the Labour tried to establish a viable coalition government by soliciting the support of the minor religious parties.

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<sup>7</sup> Later Modai exchanged his position with Moshe Nissim, the Minister of Justice, when Shamir took over as prime minister in October 1986

The concessions extracted by the minor religious parties during the period of political manoeuvring aroused growing public resentment that manifested in a demonstration by some 100,000 people in Jerusalem on 8 April 1990. The demands for electoral reform subsequently led to a ruling by the Supreme Court requiring all political parties to make public the details of coalition agreement before a government could be formed. By the end of April Peres acknowledged failure on his attempts and Herzog accordingly invited Shamir to form a new government. The initial 21-day period to accomplish the task was later extended due to disagreements among potential coalition parties over cabinet posts. A narrow right-wing government was formed on 11 June.

The break down of the NUG in the spring of 1990, the scandalous behaviour of the political parties in attempting to form a new government, the paralysis of government and the abuse of power led to the widespread demand for an immediate change to the electoral system.<sup>8</sup> There were many complaints against the existing electoral system. Marginal groups enjoy considerable power. Proportional representation encourages the formation of special interest parties appealing to small constituencies. The success of small parties came at the expense of the major parties. In practice, no party has ever won an outright majority. Among so many

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<sup>8</sup> Joel Peters, 'The Nature of Israeli Politics and Society', in Kyle, Keith and Joel Peters (ed.) *Whither Israel? The Domestic Challenges*, London, Touris & Co. Ltd., Publishers, p.7.

parties, representing so many points of view coalition formation is very difficult. Coalition leaders have to 'buy' the support of small parties. There is insufficient personal accountability. No individual member of the *Knesset* receives a vote from the people, only party lists are voted for. To secure his personal political future, a *Knesset* member elected on one political programme has been known to change his spots and throw his support behind a programme diametrically opposed to it. Only in 1990, the *Knesset* passed a law providing that a *Knesset* member who leaves his party should lose his seat.

Any electoral system needs to strike a balance between a number of competing values, such as fairness, responsibility and political efficacy. While proportional representation system counteracts the effect of fairness, heavy price paid in terms of responsibility to the *Knesset*. However, under this political system the lion's share of the executive time and energy must be spent on keeping coalition members placated. Not only marginal parties but also factions within parties must constantly be accommodated, since the defection of even one of them to the opposition can endanger a government's survival. The most destructive consequences of this phenomenon is that the executive seldom retains the energy to pursue a vigorous programme of legislation, and indeed, usually prefers doing nothing to doing anything and even slightly controversial.

Electoral reforms have been an active issue on the Israeli scholars, initially, under the leadership of the jurist Uriel Reichmann has studied the issue and gave many proposals.<sup>9</sup>

1. The Head of the Government is to be elected directly and always simultaneously with elections to the *Knesset*. If any one Candidate receives 40 percent of the votes cast, he/she is elected; otherwise, the leading two candidates compete in a second election ten days later.
2. Candidates for head of the government must receive the endorsement of 20 *Knesset* members or of 200,000 votes for their names to be placed on the ballot. This provision makes it unlikely that anyone other than well-known mainstream public figures can be nominated.
3. The Prime Minister appoints and dismisses ministers of the government however binding decisions of the executive may be made by the vote of a majority of the *Knesset*.
4. The *Knesset* can remove the Prime Minister and government by a vote of no confidence. However, such a motion must pass with a majority of 71. This leads automatically to the dissolution of the *Knesset* and the calling of new elections for both *Knesset* and Prime

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<sup>9</sup> Yitzhak Klein, 'The Problem of Systemic Reform' in Kyle, Keith and Joel Peters (ed.), *Whither Israel? The Domestic Challenges*, London, Touris & Co. Ltd. Publishers, p.53.

Minister. Similarly, the resignation of the head of the government dissolves the government and the *Knesset* simultaneously. The proposed system preserves the proportional representation system in elections to the *Knesset* but largely frees the executive of its consequences.

5. Some thought has been given by proponents of electoral reform to improving the quality of 'responsibility' in the *Knesset* by combining proportional and constituency election. One proposal is based on the German model, in which half the legislature is directly elected and other half is elected by proportional representation proportional to its share of the vote. The other half by the proportional system. Another attractive feature of the German system is the five- percent electoral threshold, which denies representation to marginal parties.

6. Both major parties agreed to adopt Primary system for ranking the candidates in the party's list.

Thus, a debate was started on the electoral reform. Proponents of the direct election of the prime minister agreed that the idea of direct election of the individual can in theory address responsibility and political efficacy. A legislation or chief executive who is directly elected serves at the pleasure of the people and can be dismissed at election time if he fails to please. Direct election thus may be a method of securing active and

effective governance committed to finding and implementing solution to public problems. Direct election of individuals to the legislature, which necessarily involves a constituency based system, provides an antidote to the fragmentation of political power typical of proportional system. Small parties' candidates would fall by the wayside.

Another argument in favour of the direct election of the prime minister is that Israel's Arabs number around 800,000, approximately one fifth of the country's total population. Yet, their numerical strength has not translated itself into a share of national power. The fragmentary nature of Arab politics is one of the reasons for this. The Arabs have been unable to create one party or form an electoral alliance. The Arabs have failed to exploit Israel's system of proportional representation to their benefit. The direct election of prime minister would afford them a say previously denied and will make them a constituency to be courted.

Most proposals for electoral reform in Israel involve incorporating elements of constituency based election for the *Knesset* and direct election for the head of the government. Two objections have been raised against it. In the first place, a change to a pure constituency system would involve too a sacrifice of the fairness, principal. Secondly, Israel has no experience



with an executive independent of the *Knesset*. Some legislative check on the tenure of the executive would be desirable.<sup>10</sup>

A public petition in favour of electoral reform gathered over 600,000 signatures, nearly 20 per cent of the electorate. During 1990, four *Knesset* members<sup>11</sup> representing a broad spectrum of political opinion submitted roughly similar bills for the direct election of the prime minister. These bills were later fused into a composite text. The bill was passed in 1992 and came into force in 1996.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.53.

<sup>11</sup> Four *Knesset* members were David Libai, Uriel Lynn, Amnon Rubenstein and Yoash Tsiddon.

## Chapter II

### ELECTORAL REFORMS 1992

The 12<sup>th</sup> *Knesset* (1988-92) enacted legislation that was significant for the Israeli political system. Among the most significant legislation was the amendment to *The Basic Law: The Government* which changed the electoral system from what could be called a 'Purely Parliamentary' System to what can be called a Quasi-Presidential or Quasi Parliamentary Model.<sup>1</sup> Elections for the *Knesset* are described in *The Basic Law: The Knesset* as follows: 'The *Knesset* shall be elected general, national direct, equal, secret and proportional election'.<sup>2</sup> Thus the basis of the *Knesset*-election is an extreme 'strict list' 'Hagenbatch-Bischoff' proportional representation formula.<sup>3</sup> This system instituted in the British mandate time. The idea of proportional representation was in fact, to give opportunity to every section of the society to have representation in the *Knesset*.<sup>4</sup>

Every Israeli national over the age of 18 years has the right to vote. The government puts much efforts into making all Israelis aware of their

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory S. Mahler, 'The Forming of the Netanyahu government: Coalition -formation in a Quasi.-Parliamentary Setting' in Karsh, Efraim, *From Rabin to Netanyahu Israel's Troubled Agenda*, Frank, Cass, 1997, p.4.

<sup>2</sup> Asher Arian, *Politics in Israel, The Second Generation*, Revised edition, New Jersey, Catham House Publishers, 1994, p.133.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Diskin, 'The New Political System of Israel' in *Government and Opposition*, vol.34 (4), 1999, p.500.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Stellman, 'Electing a prime minister and a Parliament: The Israel Election 1996' in *Parliamentary Affairs* # 49(4) October 96, pp.648-60.

right to vote, to help them qualify for this right, and to encourage them to exercise it. Voting is restricted mainly because of budgetary considerations to the voters' permanent area of residence. There is no postal vote, so Israeli dwelling abroad can not exercise their right to vote. Likewise, jailed persons cannot vote. Exceptions are soldiers and sailors, diplomats and emissaries of state organisations for whom special arrangements are made. Every citizen of Israel who is 21 years of age on the day the parties may stand for election. Judiciary must be wholly divorced from partisan politics. Army affairs and senior civil servants likewise are barred, unless they resign before declaring their candidatures. This is designed to ensure that the machinery of government is insulated from party-politics.

Each Party presents a list of candidates up to a total of 120 the entire membership of the *Knesset*. The candidates on each list are set out in whatever order of priority the party itself decides.<sup>5</sup> The major change in the new electoral system involved the direct election of the Prime -Minister. According to the section 3(b) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992),<sup>6</sup> The prime minister is elected in the national general elections, to be conducted on a direct, equal, and secret basis in compliance with *The Election Law*.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/news/elect\\_result.html](http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/news/elect_result.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.israel.mfa.gov.il/news/result.html>.

## **Eligibility of prime ministerial Candidates<sup>7</sup>**

Persons fulfilling the following conditions are eligible candidates for the prime ministership.

1. He/she is eligible for candidacy to the *Knesset* and is at least thirty years old on the day of submission of candidacy.
2. Should the elections for the Prime Minister be conducted at the same time as the *Knesset* elections-the candidate for Prime Minister will head the list of candidates for the *Knesset*.
3. Should special elections be held he would have to be a member of *Knesset*.

## **The Right to propose a candidate<sup>8</sup>**

The following bodies may propose prime ministerial candidates:

1. A faction of the outgoing *Knesset*, with no less than ten members, having submitted a list of candidates to the *Knesset*.
2. A few factions of the outgoing *Knesset*, with not less than ten members, having submitted a list of candidates or lists of candidates to the *Knesset*.

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<sup>7</sup> Under Section 8(a) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

<sup>8</sup> Section 9(a) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

3. Fifty thousand enfranchised persons.

In special elections, a candidate may be proposed by a faction or factions of the *Knesset*, the total number of members of the faction or factions not being less than ten members.<sup>9</sup>

If the outgoing Prime -Minister has served for seven consecutive years he/she cannot stand for re-election.<sup>10</sup>

Elections usually take place on the third Tuesday of the month of Cheshvan in the year of election. The results of the elections for prime minister are to be published within 14 days of election day. The elected prime minister will be the candidate receiving more than half of the valid votes, provided that he is also a *Knesset* member.<sup>11</sup> If no one of the candidate receives the number of votes prescribed in section 13(a) of *The Basic Law: The Government*, run-off elections will be held on the first Tuesday after the passage of two weeks from the publication of the results of the first election.<sup>12</sup> In the run-off elections the candidates standing for election will be the two candidates who received the largest number of valid votes in the first elections, and who are *Knesset* members. In the run-off elections, the candidate receiving the largest number of valid votes will

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<sup>9</sup> Section 9(b) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

<sup>10</sup> Henri Stellman, 'Electing a prime minister and a Parliament: The Israeli-Election 1996' in *Parliamentary Affairs* # 49, (4), October 96, p.650.

<sup>11</sup> Section, 13(a) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

<sup>12</sup> Section, 13(b) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

be declared the winner.<sup>13</sup> In the event of the death of one of the candidates before the conducting of the run-off elections, or if he is unable for reasons of health to stand for election therein, the person who proposed him may propose another candidate in his/her place, provided that the said proposal be made not later than 96 hours before the run-off elections and the provisions of section 12(c) will be apply *mutatis mutandi*,<sup>14</sup> should the candidate for the run-off elections resign, his place will be taken by that candidate who, in the first elections received the next largest amount of valid votes, and is a *Knesset* member.<sup>15</sup>

Should there be a sole candidate, whether in the first elections or in the run-off elections, the election will be conducted by way of a vote either for him, or against him and he will be elected if the number of valid votes for him exceeds the number of valid votes against him.<sup>16</sup> If no candidate is elected according to the provisions of the section-13, special elections will be held.

Within 45 days of the publication of the election results the prime minister elect shall present his/her list of ministers and basic policy guidelines before the *Knesset*, asking for its confidence. The number of

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<sup>13</sup> Section, 13(c) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

<sup>14</sup> *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992) Section 12-Death of Candidate or Cessation of Candidacy.

<sup>15</sup> Section, 13(d) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

<sup>16</sup> Section, 13(e) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

ministers, including the prime minister may not exceed 18 or be less than 8. At least half must be *Knesset* members, but all must be eligible for *Knesset* membership. Deputy ministers may be appointed, up to a total of six, and must be *Knesset* members. Should the prime minister-elect fail to present a government to the *Knesset* (i.e. is unable to form a majority coalition), a special election for prime minister will be held within 60 days. Should the same candidate once again be elected and once again fail to present a government within 45 days, that candidate may not stand for election in the third round. The prime minister's term of office corresponds to that of the *Knesset*, except when *Knesset* elections must be repeated (i.e. as a result of faulty elections) or where the law calls for a special election of the prime minister.<sup>17</sup>

The changes to *The Basic Law: The Government* also described the circumstances under which the *Knesset* might be dissolved before the expiry of its four-year term and new elections called. Under the new system, new elections for the *Knesset* would take place

1. if the *Knesset* rejected the list of ministers proposed by the prime minister,

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<sup>17</sup> Asher Arian, *Politics in Israel, The Second Generation*, Revised edition, New Jersey, Catham House Publication, 1994, p.132-142.

2. if it expressed no-confidence in the prime minister by a majority of at least 61 MKs,
3. if it failed to adopt the *Budget Law* within three months after the beginning of the fiscal year and
4. If the *Knesset* dissolved itself by passing a Special law to that effect.<sup>18</sup>

A prime minister can also disperse the *Knesset*. If the prime minister ascertains that a majority of the *Knesset* opposes the government, and that the effective functioning of the Government is prevented as a result, he may, with the approval of the President of the State, disperse the *Knesset* by way of an order to be published in *Reshumot*. A decision to disperse the *Knesset* will be regarded as a decision of the *Knesset* to disperse prior to the completion of its term of service, and new elections for the *Knesset* and the prime minister, will be conducted on the last Tuesday before the passage of 60 days from the day of the dispersion of the *Knesset*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory S. Mahler, 'The forming of the Netangahu Government: Coalition formation in a Quasi-Parliamentary Setting' in Efraim Karsh, *From Rabin to Netanyahu, Israel's Troubled Agenda*, Frank Cass, 1997, p.5-6.

<sup>19</sup> These guidelines are derived from material provided by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Elections in Israel 1996: Background' <http://www.Israel.mfa.gov.il/news/election1996.html>.



But the prime minister may not exercise his authority cited above in two circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

1. From the beginning of the period of service of the incoming *Knesset* and until the establishment of the new government.
2. From the day on which the *Knesset* Committee of the *Knesset* decided to recommend that he be removed from office.

There was similar concern about when, under the new system, the popularly elected prime minister might be 'fired' and new elections called, what would be the functional equivalent of a vote of non-confidence under the 'old' system. Under the new electoral system new elections for prime minister would take place-

1. if the *Knesset* (by a special majority of 80 members) voted to remove the prime minister from office,
2. if the *Knesset* by a regular majority vote removed the prime minister from office due to a conviction on an offence involving moral turpitude,
3. if the prime minister was unable to appoint the specified minimum of eight ministers to form his government, or,

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<sup>20</sup> Section, 22(b) of *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992).

4. If the prime minister dies, or was permanently unable to fulfil his functions.<sup>21</sup>

## **Merits**

Any electoral system needs to strike a balance between a number of competing values, such as fairness, responsibility and political efficacy. Direct election of the individual can in theory address responsibility and political efficacy. A legislation or Chief executive who is directly elected serves at the pleasure of the people and can be dismissed at election time if he fails to please. Direct elections thus may be a method of securing active and effective governers committed to finding and implementing Solution to public problems.<sup>22</sup>

The idea behind the direct popular election of the prime minister was that separating the executive from the legislative branch would give the head of government a national mandate independent of, or at least less dependent on, the traditional bargaining that weakened previous governments.

Directly elected executive is free to choose his own Cabinet (with a *Knesset* approval), in which members served at the will of the prime

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<sup>21</sup> 'Focus on Isreal' , Israel Information Centre, New Delhi, March 1999.

<sup>22</sup> Yitzhak Klein, 'The Problem of systematic Reform in Kyle, Keith and Joel Peters (ed.), *Whither Israel? The Domestic Challenges*, London, Tauris and Co. Ltd. Publishers.

minister and are not bound by Party discipline or obligation. If the prime minister were directly elected, it was argued he would be free to undertake policies without considering the demands of the smaller parties, essential players in any coalition.<sup>23</sup> Thus the progress of the country will be enhanced.

TH-10351

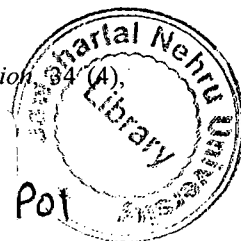
The new legislation limited the number of political appointments available to the prime minister, especially in a coalition Cabinet of many factions.<sup>24</sup> For example, provision of the appointment of not more than 18 Cabinet ministers. Previous prime minister had formed Cabinets with up to two dozen ministers available as pay off to coalition partners. For example, 25 Cabinet ministers in 1984 and 21 Cabinet Ministers in 1988. You have said 25 in 1984 a few pages ago]. It was speculated that changes would stabilise the system and decrease the political power of small parties and individual MKs, the *Knesset* itself cannot elect another premier and thus it would probably be deterred from the employment of no-confidence votes because of the 'suicidal' nature of such votes.<sup>25</sup>

The most obvious potential change is that the new model would permit a prime minister of one party to be elected who might have to form

<sup>23</sup> Dan Peretz, Gideon, 'Israel's election-a second political earthquake' in the *Middle East Journal*, 50(4), Aut. 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Barak gave in this system when he became the prime minister (1999).

<sup>25</sup> Abraham Diskin, 'New Political System of Israel' in *Government and Opposition*, Aut. 1999, p.501.



a coalition headed by a different party elected to the *Knesset*. Moreover, the functional equivalent of a non-Confidence vote-the *Knesset* 'firing' a prime minister-would now require 80 votes, not simply a majority of those MKs present and voting as had been the case in the 'old system'.<sup>26</sup> The Arab voters have failed to exploit Israel's system of proportional representation to their benefit. Ironically, the move to the directly electing prime minister by the people will afford them a say that was previously denied and will make them a constituency to be courted.<sup>27</sup>

#### **Demerits:**

The voters would enjoy, under the new procedure, the ability to 'split' their votes by supporting a candidate for premiership who represents a major party in the parallel *Knesset* elections, while supporting a candidate for *Knesset* on the sectarian ground. Thus, the electoral power of the small parties would increase. Furthermore, it had been expected that the small political parties would try to pressure the major candidates not only after the elections (because of the need of the government formed by the elected prime minister to win a confidence vote), but also prior to elections

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<sup>26</sup> Gugory S. Mahler, 'The Forming of the Netanyahu Government: Coalition formation in a Quasi-Parliamentary Setting', in Karsh, Efrain, *From Robin to Netanjahu, Israel's troubled Agenda*, Frankcass, 1997, p.6.

<sup>27</sup> Joel Peters, 'The Nature of Israeli Politics and Society', in Kyle, Keith and Joel Peters (Ed.), *Whither Israel? The democratic Challenges*, London, p.13.

(because of the desire of the major candidates to mobilise as much public support as possible).

Under section 14, the Prime minister -elect must present his government to the *Knesset* within 45 days of the publication of the election results. Section 15 (a) states that if he fails to do so within the stipulated time, then special election would be held, i.e. a re-run election for the premiership, but not for the *Knesset*. Under section 15(b), if he fails to form a government after a second attempt, he is disqualified from standing again.<sup>28</sup> Inevitably, these provisions give exceptional power to any small group whose support is necessary to form a government.<sup>29</sup>

Another possible outcome of the new system was a situation in opposition to the elected prime minister would mobilise a majority on the *Knesset*. Such a majority could try, for instance, to change the law rather than to call new double elections.<sup>30</sup>

It was expected that the power of the two large parties would decrease considerably and the 'effective' number of new parties would increase.<sup>31</sup> According to Moshe Arens,<sup>32</sup> a former Defence Minister of the

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<sup>28</sup> Allan E. Shapiro, 'Headed for Trouble', Jerusalem Post, 29 March 1996.

<sup>29</sup> David CapitanChik, 'Israeli General Election of 1996, Another upheaval, in *Government and Opposition*, vol. 31(4) Autumn, 1996. P. 451-452.

<sup>30</sup> R.Y. Hazan, 'Presidential Parliamentarism: Direct Popular Election of the prime minister:: Israel's New Electoral and Political System' in *Electoral Studies*, 15 (1996), pp.21-37.

<sup>31</sup> A. Diskin, 'New Political System of Israel', in *Government and Opposition*, vol. 34(4), Autumn 1999, p.502.

<sup>32</sup> Henri Stellman, 'Electing a prime minister and a Parliament: The Israeli Election 1996' in *Parliamentary Affairs* # 49, (4), October 96, p.651.

Likud, the new electoral system provided for none of the checks and balances considered necessary in a system in which central authority is vested in the Chief Executive, the directly elected Prime -Minister. The best known executive system of government, that of the US, provides for a clear division between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government, and for extensive checks and balances, involving the federal Congress as well as State governments, which greatly restrict and limit the power of the executive.

New system creates the possibility of a deadlock between the prime minister and *Knesset*, in a scenario in which an embattled prime minister decides to ignore a hostile *Knesset* and rely instead on his popular mandate to rule by executive fiat. In that situation the *Knesset* might pass a vote of no confidence and force new elections. However, it is felt that many members might hesitate to embark on such a course if it places a question mark over their own political futures. The new law does not provide a political mechanism for setting conflicts between the government and the *Knesset*, instead there can always be resort to the Supreme Court. But handling political decisions over to the judiciary could seriously compromise Israeli democracy in general and the judiciary in particular.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> David CapitanChik, 'Israeli general Election of 1996, another upheaval, in *Government and Opposition*, vol. 31 (4) Autumn 1996, p.452-453.

On the issue of the new electoral system it was viewed that the forming of the new government coalition could be accompanied by endless horse-trading and blackmailing, problems which persisted in the 'old' system. Thus the new electoral system can not remove the demerits of coalition politics. The instability was expected due to the bargaining power enjoyed by the smaller parties. As would discussed, in fact new electoral system promotes the fragmentation of the society and polity.

## Chapter III

### 14<sup>TH</sup> *KNESSET*

On 29 May 1996, for the first time Israelis went to the polls to elect a prime minister as well as new *Knesset* and the result was yet another upheaval in Israeli Political life.<sup>1</sup> Although there were only two final candidates for prime minister in 1996, Labour Party's Shimon Peres and Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu, several other politicians aspired to the post. Two of the most prominent, Rafael Eitan of Tzomet<sup>2</sup> and David Levy of Gesher<sup>3</sup> were persuaded by promises of influential posts in a Likud government to form a joint list with Likud and were keep out of the race for prime minister. Netanyahu promised senior Cabinet positions to Levy and Eitan and offer seven 'safe' seats each to Gesher and Tzomet.<sup>4</sup> Formation of a joint Likud-Tzomet-Gesher *Knesset* list, headed by

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<sup>1</sup> David CapitanChik, 'Israeli general election of 1996, another upheaval' in *Government and Opposition*, vol.31(4) Autumn, 1996, p.449.

<sup>2</sup> Rafel Eitan, former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defence force had been a member of both the Likud and Labour party before establishing his own Tzomet Party in 1984. It supports the concept of 'Greater Israel'.

<sup>3</sup> David Levy, a leader of the Oriental or Sephardi Jewish Community. In February 1996, he left Likud to form his own Gesher Party because of his better animosity toward the new leader of Likud -Netanyahu. He supports. Likud's opposition to withdrawal from the occupied territories.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory S. Mahler, 'The forming of the Netanyahu Government: Coalition formation in a Quasi-Parliament Setting' in Efraim Karsh, *From Rabin to Netanyahu, Israel's Troubled Agenda*, London, Frank Cass, 1997, p.12.



Netanyahu, prevented greater fictionalisation of political right and removed any credible right-of-centre competition to Netanyahu.<sup>5</sup>

### **Election Campaign**

The election campaign was dominated by a series of domestic and foreign policy issues. The crux of the electoral debate centred on the 1993 Oslo accord between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation organisation and its subsidiary agreements. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin dominated the scene until his assassination on 4 November 1995. Those who perceived Oslo I and II as steps towards a genuine peace settlements generally favoured Rabin for prime minister, as well as Labour or one of the partners to its left. Those who opposed the peace process, or who regarded it as flawed, backed Netanyahu and Likud, or one of the right-of-centre parties, or alternatively a religious party.

When the Oslo II agreement was presented to the *Knesset*, in October 1995, it was approved by a margin of only one vote. Opinion polls indicated that the Israeli population was equally divided between those agreeing with Labour's "Land for Peace" approach leading to a peace settlement and those who feared that withdrawal from the West Bank or the Golan Heights would undermine Israel's Security. Consequently

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<sup>5</sup> Dan Gideon Peretz, 'Israel's election a second Political earthquake' in *Middle East Journal*, vol.50(4), Autumn, 1996, pp.531.

Netanyahu and Likud made, "retreating" from these two territories the chief electoral issue in their attempt to replace Rabin and Labour-led coalition. They asserted that Rabin, and especially his Foreign Minister, Peres, has become too accommodative to the Arabs on security matters. By the end of 1995, Netanyahu was ahead of Rabin in some opinion polls.<sup>6</sup>

The intensity of the political debate diminished considerably after Rabin's assassination. In the first few weeks following the assassination, Rabin's successor, Peres, led Netanyahu in Public opinion polls by a margin of almost 20 percent. Some of his close advisors urged Peres to capitalise on the crises by calling for an immediate election, thus advancing the date scheduled from October or November 1996 by almost a year. The new prime minister refused to press his advantage and instead waited several weeks before deciding to move the election date to 29 May.<sup>7</sup>

By early 1995, a series of catastrophic events led again to sharpened rhetoric between Labour and Likud. A series of five terrorist Suicide attacks committed by *Hamas* killed 59 people in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Ashkelon during a seven-day period starting on 26 February 1996. It changed the political atmosphere. Labour's ability to maintain security was now the dominant issue. Following the *Hamas* suicide bombings in

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Gideon Peretz, 'Israel's election a second political earthquake' in *Middle East Journal*, vol.50 (4), Aut 1996, p.532.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Crideon Peretz, 'Israel's election, a second Political earthquake' in *Middle East Journal*, vol.50(4), Aut.1996, p.533.

February 1996, the gap in Opinion polls between Peres and Netanyahu diminished. Some polls taken in late February and early March showed that twice as many Israeli believed that Netanyahu was more capable than Peres to eliminate terrorism. During the month of March and April, however, when the effect of the bombing seemed to fade away, Peres gradually regained his leading margin of three to six percent over Netanyahu.<sup>8</sup>

The most drastic security measure was the "*Grapes of Wrath*" campaign in April 1996, against Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. The two-week pounding by the Israeli army was in response to Hezbollah firing Katyusha rockets at northern Israel, which caused injuries to some 13 Israeli civilian. However, Hezbollah claimed that the rocket attacks had been provoked by deliberate assaults on Lebanese civilians by Israeli armed focus or their proxies. "Grapes of Wrath" was costly both materially and politically.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the civilian casualties, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese fled their homes, and hundreds of buildings were destroyed. The operation cost over \$100 million in military expenditure and over \$30 million in damages from Hezbollah Katyushas.<sup>10</sup> Likud criticised "Grapes of Wrath" because it failed to finish the task of uprooting Hezbollah. The operation had serious repercussions within Israeli Arab

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<sup>8</sup> Jerusalem Post International Edition, No.1848, 6 April 1996, p.6.

<sup>9</sup> Dan Gideon Peretz, 'Isreal's election, a second political earthquake' in *Middle East Journal*, vol.50(4), Autumn, 1996, p.535.

<sup>10</sup> JPI, no.1852, Week ending 4 May, 1996, p.3.

Community. Peres was severely castigated by a number of his Israeli -Arab allies for the brutality of the operation. According to Yossi Sarid, the Environment Minister in the Peres Cabinet, "The Grapes of Wrath" was an "idiotic" step and liable to lose the Israeli Arab votes.<sup>11</sup>

Debate about the Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations which were restarted in the United States in Dec. 1995 revolved around the strategic importance of the Golan Heights for Israel's defence. For many Israelis this has involved 'thinking the unthinkable', providing for Israeli security without the Golan. The arguments have long been dominated by the popular view that the strategic advantages of occupying the Heights outweigh by far any advantages to be gained from a peace treaty with Syria. Moreover Syria's autocratic, ruthless and hostile regime is not to be trusted.<sup>12</sup>

In the run-up to the elections Labour attempted to persuade voters that it would seek to compensate for withdrawal from the Heights by obliging Syria to agree to the demilitarisation of sections of its territory further to the east; to thin its forces; establishing early warning stations in Syrian territory; and by persuading Damascus to establish a rich fabric of political and economic ties. The Likud, on the other hand, while declaring

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> David CapitanChik, 'Israeli general election of 1996, another upheaval' in *Government and Opposition* vol.31(4) Autumn, 1996, p.457.

its intention to work towards a peace treaty with Syria, based its position on the Golan Law of 1981, which applied Israeli law, jurisdiction and administration to the Golan Heights. For the Likud and its allies, any withdrawal from the Golan would endanger the country's strategic interests in the area of water as well as national and personal security.<sup>13</sup>

Labour's platform strongly emphasised security while maintaining the party's commitment to the peace process, "aiming at the cessation of the Arab Israeli conflict by the year 2000".<sup>14</sup> It reiterated Peres' vision of a "New Middle East" based on "a Common Market with regional integration, tourism, transport and communication system and co-operation in the fields of culture and science".<sup>15</sup> Security was to be achieved through international co-operation in the fight against terrorism and Iran was singled out as "the catastrophic link between a fundamentalist ideology and non-conventional weapons."<sup>16</sup> It emphasised that although Israel would not "rule over the Palestinian People", it would insist on "a United Jerusalem... under Israeli jurisdiction."<sup>17</sup> With the Jordan river as Israel's eastern Security border and "sovereignty over the Jordan valley, Northeast Dead Sea area, the Etzion

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<sup>13</sup> Official Statement released by the Likud Policy Bureau, 4 January 1996 available at <http://www.israel-mfagov.il/news/results.html>

<sup>14</sup> Embassy of Israel, 'Israel Election 1996: an Overview', May 1996, p.7.

<sup>15</sup> Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East: A Framework and process towards an era of Peace*, TelAviv, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Embassy of Israel, 'Israel Election 1996', p.8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.8-11.

Block and areas essential to the security of Israel"<sup>18</sup> the new government would also reject the Palestinian right to return, and support the "settlement of the Palestinian refugee problem outside the borders of Israel".<sup>19</sup> No new Jewish settlements would be established in the occupied territories, but Israel would maintain jurisdiction over the most Israeli settlers there. A referendum was promised to approve final peace arrangement with both Syria and the Palestinian.

Likud's platform reiterated the traditional Revisionist<sup>20</sup> claim about "the right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel ... an eternal right, not subject to disputes".<sup>21</sup> According to the platform, Jewish settlements would be strengthened in the territories and Labour's settlement freeze would be rescinded. While conducting direct peace negotiations with the Arab states, security would be "a first condition in any peace agreement".<sup>22</sup> A Likud government would honour previous international agreement and "continue the diplomatic process to achieve a just and lasting peace in the Middle East"<sup>23</sup> While recognising "the facts created on the ground by the various accords", Likud would "act to reduce the dangers to the future and security

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>20</sup> The Revisionist Movement was established in the 1920's by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. It was a militant nationalist party and the predecessor of Herut, which was the predecessor of Likud.

<sup>21</sup> Embassy of Israel, 'Israeli Election 1996', p.13.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

of Israel resulting from these agreements.<sup>24</sup> Likud would continue negotiations with the Palestinian Authority

on condition that the Palestinians fully honour all their obligations. Most important among these are that the Palestinians annul in an unequivocal manner the clauses in the Palestinian charter which calls for the destruction of Israel, and that they prevent terror and incitement against Israel... The Jordan River will be the eastern border of the state of Israel, South of Lake Kinneret. This will be the permanent border between the state of Israel and Jordan".<sup>25</sup>

Likud stated that "Peres will divide Jerusalem". It charged that in 1995 and 1996, Peres' cabinet colleague Yossi Beilin had met clandestinely in Sweden with Arafat to decide the future of the Holy city. Evidence of Labour's dereliction was the continued presence of PA representatives working from the Orient House in East Jerusalem and the continued operation of Palestinian Security agents and a number of PLO institutions in the Arab sector of the city. Likud remained firmly opposed to the creation of an independent Palestinian State, although it did state that "it recognised the facts created by the Oslo accords".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>26</sup> 'Guidelines for future Talks with the Palestinians', *Jerusalem Post*, 26 April, 1996.

There was a tough competition for the support of religious groups. The Rabin Assassination in November 1995 had highlighted the divide between Israel's orthodox and ultra-orthodox communities on the one hand and the country's secular majority on the other. What made the tragedy all the more shocking was that the assassin, Yigal Amir, was a product of the state system of religious education and believed that he was carrying out both a national and sacred duty. If anything, the assassination was clear evidence of the extent to which Israel's orthodox community had moved to the right in contrast to the early years of the state, when the religious camp was either supportive of or indifferent towards Israel's secular political system.

The supporters of the ultra-orthodox parties are highly disciplined and they can always be counted upon to vote as their rabbinical sages dictate. The rabbinical leaders had always been hostile to the Labour Zionism of Shimon Peres and they were unimpressed with the personal qualities of Binyamin Netanyahu. However, it was clear to them that if he was to win, Netanyahu needed the positive support of the religious camp, whereas for Shimon Peres, it would have been enough for them to abstain. In 1996 the religious parties were able to support the Likud candidate,



knowing that their material prospects would coincide with their political spiritual aspirations.<sup>27</sup>

### **Election Results and evaluation:**

The total number of Israelis eligible to vote was 3,933,250 and there was a turn out of 79.7 percent a 2.5 percent increase compared to 1992. Twenty parties registered for the election, but in the end only 11 parties passed the threshold of 1.5 percent of the total vote, compared with 10 parties in last election.<sup>28</sup> In the election for prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu obtained 1,502,023 votes or 50.4 percent, whereas Shimon Peres received 1,471,566 votes or 49.5 percent.<sup>29</sup>

Analysing the results of the ballot for the prime minister, it can be pointed out that the close result indicates a divided country. On the other hand, it is stressed that if one ignored the vote of the Arab-Israelis for the purpose of a sectorial analysis, the victorious candidate can claim a wider support amongst the Jewish electorate. Voting breakdown amongst Israeli Arabs indicates that some 48,000 voters either did not cast a ballot or voted

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<sup>27</sup> David Capitanchik, 'The Israeli General Election of 1996-Another Upheaval'? In *Government and Opposition*, vol. 31 (4) Autumn, 1996, p.461-462.

<sup>28</sup> Henri Stellman, 'Electing a prime minister and Parliament: The Israel Election 1996' in *Parliamentary Affairs*, #49 (4), October 96, p.658.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/news/elect1996.html>.

for Netanyahu, leading to the view that the defeat of Peres could be attributed to the Arab votes.<sup>30</sup>

The contest between Peres and Netanyahu reflected the socio-economic division in the Jewish community. The majority of middle

**Table I**

**Election of prime minister 1996**

Total nos. of Votes	Netanyahu's Votes	Shimon Peres' votes
3,933,250	1,502,023	1,471,566
	(50.4%)	(49.5%)

Source: <http://www/isreal-mfa.gov.il/news/results.html>

<sup>30</sup> Henri Stellman, 'Electing a prime minister and Parliament: The Israeli Election 1996' in *Parliamentary Affairs*, #49(4), October 1996, p.659.

**Table II**

**Party Representation in the *Knesset***

Party	per cent Vote 1996	Seats 1996	Seats 1992	Seat Differences
Labour	26.8	34	44	-10
Likud	25.1	32	37 (32+5) (5 seats of Tzomet)	-5
<i>Shas</i>	8.5	10	6	+4
National Religious Party	7.8	9	6	+3
<i>Meretz</i>	7.4	9	12	-3
Israel B'aliya	5.7	7	-	-
Hadash	4.2	5	3	+2
United Torah Judaism	3.2	4	4	0
Third Way	3.1	4	-	-
United Arab list	2.9	4	3	+1
Moledet	2.3	2	3	-1

Source: <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/neus/results.html>

Eastern origin, and the religious community backed Netanyahu. Among the poorer working class Jews, Netanyahu obtained 71.3 percent to Peres 28.7 percent. In purely religious settlements, like B'nei Barak,

Netanyahu captured 89 percent of the votes. In Jerusalem, Netanyahu scored 69.9 percent, whereas in cosmopolitan centre Peres was ahead with 55.1 percent in Tel Aviv and 56.6 per cent in Haifa.<sup>31</sup>

Israeli Society was divided largely along class lines, by two principal issues, the peace process and the status of religion. There seemed to be much ambiguity about the peace process. The results of opinion polls, whose reliability was undermined by the results of the 1996 election, fluctuated constantly on peace issues and the choice of prime minister. While Netanyahu received 55 percent of the Jewish votes to 45 percent for Peres, 53 percent of the Jewish population supported Oslo-II while 41 per cent were opposed, according to post-election polls. But the peace constituency diminished considerably when it came to specific provision of the Oslo accords. Well over half the Jewish population supported redeployment from Hebron, and 81 per cent favoured imposition of service restriction on Palestinian activities at the Orient House, the unofficial PLO headquarters in Jerusalem.<sup>32</sup>

What is most remarkable is that Israel's new electoral system was developed with the expressed aim to reduce the number and power of the numerous small parties. Yet paradoxically the *new system has eroded the*

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<sup>31</sup> Dan Gideon Peretz, 'Israel's election, a second Political earth quake' in *Middle East Journal*, vol.50(4), Aut. 1996, p.543.

<sup>32</sup> Foreign Broadcasting Information Service, Near East and South Asia (FBIS-NEA), 14 June 1996.

power of the larger parties and increased the number and power of the smaller parties.<sup>33</sup> *Shas*, the party of Sephardi Orthodox Jews, displaced *Meretz* as the third largest *Knesset* group. It increased from 6 in 1992 to 10 in 1996. The NRP increased its strength by fifty percent from six to nine seats with about 100,000 more votes than in 1992. Thus with 23 seats the three religious parties, namely, NRP, ultra-orthodox United Torah Judaism and *Shas* held the balance of power. They now held more *Knesset* seats than ever before, the largest previous religious block secured no more than 18 seats in 1988. With seven seats, the success of Natan Sharansky's new immigrant Israel B'aliya party was one of the great surprises of this election. Sharansky was able to articulate many of the dissatisfactions of the 700,000 Soviet Jews who arrived in Israel after the cold war. About 60 per cent of Russian immigrants voted for Netanyahu and 40 per cent for Peres in 1996.<sup>34</sup>

The Third Way movement became a political party in 1996 and gained 4 seats in the *Knesset*. It declined to support either Peres or Netanyahu for prime minister, although many of its former Labour members voted for Peres. Its objective was to prevent Peres from ceding the Golan and to convince Netanyahu to refrain from expanding Jewish

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<sup>33</sup> Henri Stelman, 'Electing a prime minister and Parliament: The Israeli Election 1996' in *Parliamentary Affairs*, 49(4) Oct 1996, p659.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

settlements in heavily populated Arab population centres in West Bank.<sup>35</sup> *Meretz*, a left-of-centre alignment of Mapam, Shinui and civil Rights Movement (Ratz) lost three of the 12 seats it had won in 1992. *Meretz* backed Peres for prime minister because of his achievements in the peace process and because it wanted him to continue negotiations with the Palestinian and Syria.<sup>36</sup>

The Democratic Front for Peace and equality (DFPE-Hadash), an alliance of the Communist Party and several other leftist and Israeli Arab groups had five seats, on increase of two seats since the 1992 elections. It supported Peres. Hadash captured about 40 percent of the Israeli Arab vote, up from 25 percent in 1992. The United Arab List (UAL) was a new alignment of the Democratic Arab Party and the Islamic movement. It gained 4 seats as compared to only 2 in 1992. Thus the Israeli Arab parties increased their *Knesset* strength from five to nine.<sup>37</sup>

The relative success of the small parties in the 1996 elections was matched by the decline in support for Israel's two major political blocs. In the four elections from 1981 to 1992, Labour and the Likud together won between 95 and 76 of the *Knesset's* 120 seats. This year the

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<sup>35</sup> JPI, no. 1842, Week ending 24 February, 1996, p.4.

<sup>36</sup> Embassy of Israel, 'Israeli Election 1996'.

<sup>37</sup> Dan Gideon Peretz, 'Israel's Election, a second political Earthquake' in *Middle East Journal*, vol.50(4), Act 1996, p.541.

Table III

Parties /Year	1981	1984	1988	1992
Labour	47	44	39	44
Likud	48	41	40	32
Total	95	85	79	76

Likud offered voters a joint list together with Tzomet and the break-way Geshar Party. In 1992, Tzomet stood as an independent list and emerged as the fourth largest party in the *Knesset* with 8 seats. This time the joint Likud list won only 32 seats in all. The fall in Labour's representation was even more dramatic, with their share of the seats falling from 44 to 34.

Thus the clear effect of the new electoral law has been the strengthening of the small parties at the expense of the large ones and thereby producing precisely the opposite of what the reform was designed to achieve.<sup>38</sup> The number of parties participating the election increased to 11 as compared to 10 in 1992 Election. Thus the fragmentation of party

<sup>38</sup> David CapitanChik, 'Israeli General Election of 1996, Another Upheaval' in *Government and Opposition*, 31(4) Aut. 1996, p.464-65.

system had taken place. The new system allowed a double vote which many Israelis used as a split vote; one for the prime minister to signal political direction on the issues of security and the peace process, and another for the party to give expression to ideological preferences. Given only one choice, many voters would have maintained this party allegiance, given the option of a double vote, many Israelis abounded their traditional support for the two larger parties and opted instead for smaller parties. What appears to be the case is that the 'split' ballot system had a 'liberating' influences upon Israeli voter.<sup>39</sup>

Apparently many voters who traditionally supported Labour or Likud did so because they saw it as a way to influence the election of the prime minister. Under the 'old' system the only way to influence the election of the prime minister was to help one party have more representation in the Knesset than the rest. That party's leader, of course, would become the prime minister. Under the 'new system' it is now possible to vote for the prime minister directly, and also to be able to vote for the Knesset, and one's choice for the former does not necessarily have to be the same as one's choice for the latter. While 50.4 percent of the valid voters were cast for the Likud candidate for prime minister, only 25.1 per

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<sup>39</sup> Gregory S. Mahler, 'The farming of the Netanyahu Government: Coalition formation in a quasi -Parliamentary Setting' on Karsh, Efraim, *From Rabin to Netanyahu, Israel Troubled Agneda*, London, Frank Cass, 1997, p.13.



cent of the valid votes were cast for the Likud lists of candidates for the Knesset. Similarly, while 49.5 percent of the valid votes were cast for the Labour candidate for prime minister, only 26.8 percent of the valid votes were cast for the Labour list of Knesset candidates. This means that half of Netanyahu's supporters deserted the Likud party when it came to voting for Knesset candidates, and virtually half of Peres' supporters deserted the Labour Party when it came to voting for Knesset list.<sup>40</sup>

This dimension of the new electoral system has a clear and undeniable impact upon the process of coalition formation in 1996. One of the motivating forces for electoral reforms in the 12<sup>th</sup> *Knesset* was that the small parties had "too much" power and were able to 'blackmail' the larger parties during coalition formation periods. What ended up happening under the new electoral system was that *the small parties became 'bigger' and had correspondingly more power vis-à-vis the larger parties in the coalition formation.* It was the first coalition government in which the orthodox religious parties controlled as many as 23 seats in the *Knesset*, giving them a significant bargaining tool in the coalition formation process.

On the issue of the new election system it was also noted that the *forming of the new government coalition was accompanied by the endless*

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<sup>40</sup> Gregory S. Mahler, 'The forming of the Netanyahu Government: Coalition formation in a Quasi-Parliamentary Setting', in Karsh, Efraim, *From Rabin to Netanyahu, Israel Troubled Agenda*, London, Frankcass, 1997, p.13-14.

*horse-trading*, a problem that the new system was also meant to alleviate. Earlier already Netanyahu had joined with Tzomet in February, and with Geshet in March and removed their leaders from the competition for prime minister and their parties as threats to Likud. The price, however was high. 9 of the 32 *Knesset* seats won by the new government were surrendered to Geshet (5) and Tzomet (4). Levy became the Deputy prime minister and Minister of foreign affairs and Eitan became minister of agriculture and environment quality. *Shas* received two major portfolios Interior and Labour and Social Affairs. NRP got two ministries with three portfolios one major (Education), one medium (Transport) and one minor (Energy). Israel B'aliya got two portfolios, Industry and Trade and Absorption and secured several other important commitments.<sup>41</sup>

Prime minister Netanyahu commenced negotiations to form a Cabinet on 2 June 1996, and on 16 and 17 June signed a series of agreements with *Shas*, the NRP, Israel B'aliya, United Torah Judaism and the Third Way. And on 18 June the new government received the approval of the *Knesset*.

One of the aims of direct prime minister election was *to make prime minister strong enough to take independent decisions. But it did not happen*. For example, nothing illustrated Netanyahu's failures to fill key positions with persons of his choice. Nor was he able to deny the hawkish

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<sup>41</sup> Keinen and Hanig, 'Coalition Talks Near Deadline', Jerusalem Post, 16 Jun 1996, p.1.

Ariel Sharon to senior cabinet post. The result was that he had been obliged to form a government in which he had few close political allies and many members who owed a greater loyalty to their narrow constituencies and other ministers than they do the him as prime minister.

Another aim to elect prime minister directly was to bring stability. But *in fact instability persisted*. Since the elections, a series of ministers resigned over Netanyahu's domestic or foreign policy. Ze'ev Benjamin Begin, who was highly critical of Netanyahu's meetings with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, and of the Hebron Agreement, was the first to leave. After voting twice against the government in one week, over the appointment of Ronnie Bar-on as attorney general and on the Hebron Agreement, he resigned from the government.<sup>42</sup> The relationship between Netanyahu and Dan Meridor, the Finance Minister was very strained which culminated in high-respected Meridor leaving the government.

Evidence of further divisions within the coalition emerged at the end of the Dec. 1997. Prior to the approval of the 1998 budget, opposition parties claimed that prime minister had bribed coalition members in order to remain in power. Earlier Netanyahu had increased funding for construction on the West bank and for orthodox schools. David Levy, the Leader of Gesher, denounced the budget claiming-it to be an infringement of social principles and on 4 January 1998 Levy resigned and Gesher withdrew from the Government. The withdrawal of Gesher left Netanyahu

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<sup>42</sup> Ami Pedahzur, 'The Downfall of the Nationa Camp?', in *Israel Affairs* vol.7, no.2&3, Winter/Spring 2001, p.47.

with a majority of 61-59, and promoted speculation about the government's imminent collapse. However, on the following day the budget was approved by a 58-62 majority.

Likewise Yitzhak Mordechai had been highly critical of Netanyahu's inability to negotiate with Palestinians. The relationship between Mordechai and Netanyahu further strained on the issue of Masha'al security scandal. On 25 September 1997, two Israeli Mossad agents, travelling on forged Canadian passports, were detained on the Jordanian capital Amman in connection with the attempted assassination, by poisoning, of the local *Hamas* Chief, Khalid Masha'al. This caused severe diplomatic row between Israel and Jordan. The crisis was eventually resolved when Israel agreed to provide antidote and to release Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, one of the founders of *Hamas*. The bungled Mossad attempt and its aftermath created tensions within Netanyahu's Cabinet. Both David Levy and Mordechai criticised Netanyahu on this matter. Before long, Netanyahu dismissed Mordechai from the Cabinet. Thus depleted by allies in the cabinet and coalition partners in the *Knesset*, on 21 Dec. 1998 Netanyahu was forced to support an opposition motion demanding the dissolution of the *Knesset* and the organisation of early election to the legislature and premiership. And a general election was subsequently scheduled for 17 May 1999.

## Chapter IV

### The 15th *Knesset*

Since the coalition government of Benjamin Netanyahu took office on 18 June 1996, it was plagued by instability. A number of ministers resigned, a number of political parties that initially participated in the coalition challenged either the policies of the government, or the leadership of Netanyahu, or both. Towards the end of 1998 it was apparent that the government did not enjoy a majority in the *Knesset*.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most fateful decision leading to the 1999 election was taken by Ehud Barak on 21 December 1998. When he rejected a last minute appeal from Benjamin Netanyahu to join him in a national unity government. As a result of this, the die was cast for the fall of the government and the setting of an early election date, which was approved in the *Knesset* by an 81 to 30 votes.<sup>2</sup> On 5 January 1999, the *Knesset* decided to have early elections by a majority of 85 to 27 (with 8 MKs abstaining). The Likud, Netanyahu's party, supported early election in both cases.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Diskin, 'New Political system of Israel', in *Government and Opposition*, vol.1 34 (4), Autumn 1999, p.504.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Elazar and M. Ben Mallov, 'Introduction: Election 1999-The interplay between character, political culture and centrism' in *Israel Affairs*, vol.7, no. 2&3, Winter/spring 2001.

<sup>3</sup> A. Diskin, 'Israel' in *European Journal of Political Research*, vol.35 (1999).

## Candidates and Alliances

In 1999 elections, there were five candidates were in the fray for Prime Minister; Barak (One Israel). Netanyahu (Likud), Yitzhak Mordechai (Centre Party), Azmi Bishara (Balad) and Benjamin Begin (National Unity). But finally two candidates were left in the race, namely, Barak and Netanyahu. Azmi Bishara of Balad was a leader of Israeli Arabs. It was his bid for leadership of Arab community in the Israel which led him to contest for the prime minister. Azmi Bishara's decision to present his candidacy for prime minister, vociferously condemned by almost all Arab political parties and prominent politicians except by his own party. Many felt his candidacy would only help the Likud candidate Netanyahu because Arab votes will be divided. To avoid a second round contest which was predicted by the opinion poll, in the last minute Azmi Bishara withdrew his candidature in the favour of Barak.

One main target of Mordechai to contest for the prime minister was to the defeat of prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But according to an opinion poll, his chances were not bright and his candidacy many feared would result in a second round election for the prime minister. Arguing that the main reason for his campaign was the defeat of Netanyahu, he removed his candidacy so that Barak could in the first round <sup>4</sup> There was

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<sup>4</sup> Efraim Torgovnik, 'The Centre Party', in *Israel Affairs*, vol.7, no. 2&3 Winter/spring 2001, p.147.

deal between Barak and Mordechai and in return Barak promised ministerial birth to Mordechai after election.

Begin was the head of the National Union list a right wing party. Begin was a Cabinet member in the Netanyahu government and he was highly critical of Netanyahu's meeting with Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat, and of the Hebron Agreement 1997. After repeatedly criticising Netanyahu, on 28 December 1998, Begin Left the Likud and announced his candidacy for prime minister, hoping to unite all the 'Greater Land of Israel Front' behind him. Begin then founded the New Herut party. The night before the elections, Begin decided to withdraw from the race following the withdrawal of the two other candidates, Azmi Bishara and Yitzhak Mordechai. He did so because he enjoyed very little support in the opinion polls.<sup>5</sup>

Thus at last only two candidates were in the fray one was Barak of One Israel and other was Netanyahu of Likud.

One Israel was an electoral front consisting of three parties; Labour, Geshar and Meimad. Geshar was a party which had left Likud coalition in 1996. Its Leader, David Levy, was a Sephardi politician who had served as a minister in all the Likud-led government, since 1997. Levy resigned from

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<sup>5</sup> A survey conducted by the Dahaf Institute and Dr. Mina Tsemach, *Yediot Ahronot*, 8 Jan, 1999 at <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/news/rsults.html>.

the Netanyahu government because the budget was against the social principle and satisfied the Priority of *Shas* party. His intention was to run for prime minister. There upon, Barak initiated talks with Levy about creating an electoral front with Gesher. The agreement between the two parties assured Levy the position of foreign minister in a Barak led government and two safe seats on the joint list, the third spot on the list (following Barak and Peres) to Levy and the 18th spot to Levy's brother Maxim. Barak understood the symbolic significance of having Levy as a top Sephardi leader on his ticket. The pact with Gesher was in accordance with Barak's earlier apology on behalf of Labour to the Sephardi community for historical 'sin' committed by the party.<sup>6</sup>

The third component of One Israel was Meimad, a religious party. Most Meimad supporters are middle class voters of Ashkenazi origin.<sup>7</sup> Given the alienation of the religious population towards Labour and the Left, the inclusion of Meimad in One Israel was designed to soften the antagonism of religious voters towards Labour, and especially Barak. The main achievement of the creation of One Israel was symbolic, especially in image. It contributed to the attempt to transform the image of the Left into

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<sup>6</sup> Giora Goldberg, 'The Israeli left in the 1999 Elections' in *Israel Affairs*, vol.7, no.143, winter/spring 2001, p.23.

<sup>7</sup> Raphael Ventura and Michal Shamir, 'Left and Right' in Israeli Politics', in *State Government and International Relation*, vol.35 (1991), p.34.



a more inclusive political movement, in contrast to the traditional elitist image that had characterised the left for at least two decades.

The right wing parties were Likud, the NRP, the National Union (an alignment between three independent parties-Moledet, Tekuma and Herut), and four other small parties-Tsomet, the Third way,<sup>8</sup> Jewish Leadership for Israel and Moreshet Avot.

### **Campaign**

The Left platform headed by Barak stated that One Israel will "endow the citizens of Israel with maximal security based on a strong army and true peace with our neighbours. We will never agree to return to the 1967 border". These general statements could have been adopted by almost any political party in Israel, including Likud. No specific programmes were mentioned. No distinction was made between relations with the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon. Issues such as the Wye Agreement and the Jewish Settlement in West Bank were ignored.

The rest of the platform was also formulated in general terms. The platform called for strengthening the democratic regime allocating resources to fight domestic violence, and confirming Israel 'as a Jewish, Zionist and democratic state'. The economic chapter of the platform was

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<sup>8</sup> It is a right-wing party based upon the party's hawkish attitude towards any possibility for withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

also formulated in a broad manner, supporting free market', 'mutual responsibility', 'enhanced growth' and 'wise government investments'. The sole issue in the platform which was presented in a militant way was the enlistment of ultra-orthodox citizens who 'receive massive funding from the state budget' in the army.<sup>9</sup> The right wing platform headed by Netanyahu focused on issues of land and security ignoring other domestic issue like unemployment, economic growth, and social security.

In 1999 it was Ehud Barak who set the agenda of the campaign. His One Israel focused on issues such as unemployment and Netanyahu's allegedly unequal policy of resource allocation, which made the ultra-orthodox and settlers sectors highly privileged. Barak also gave the Israeli people a message of Unity, which was extremely important, according to the polls.<sup>10</sup> Prior to the elections and in the spirit of national reconciliation. Barak called on two parties to join him. The first was Meimad, a Dovish Zionist religious party and the second was Gesher, a socially focused Sephardi party led by David Levy, a former senior Likud leader. The alignment between the three parties was called One Israel as it had already been discussed. At the same time, Netanyahu was caught several times talking about the secular population and the left in derisive terms and thus

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<sup>9</sup> Giora Goldberg, 'The Israeli Left in the 1999 Elections', in *Israel Affairs*, vol. 7, no.2 & 3 Winter/spring 2001; p.26.

<sup>10</sup> Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, Peace Index-May 1999. ([www.tau.ac.il/peace](http://www.tau.ac.il/peace)).

attained the image of an arrogant manipulator trying to maintain his position by divisive messages. He also tried to hold on to his 1996 winning strategy, namely the combination of Jerusalem and terrorism issues. Netanyahu failed to understand that when circumstances change and new issues arise, there is a need to adopt.

For two reasons Netanyahu's persistent emphasis on issue of land and security turned out to be a mistake. First, the Israeli public, suffering from economic recession and increasing rates of unemployment, yearned for a leader who would have an economic and social plan aiming to improve everyday life in the country. Barak appeared to offer this. Meanwhile the Jerusalem issue which was in the forefront of Netanyahu's 1996 campaign became a non-issue, especially, after Barak's promise not to make any territorial compromise in the city. Barak's statement was even supported by Ehud Olmert, the Mayor of Jerusalem, who is known for his hawkish stance. As for the terrorism issue, it was no longer felt to be a immediate threat to the public's safety due to a decrease in the number of terrorist acts carried out by Islamic terrorist movements during Netanyahu's term.<sup>11</sup> Thus this issue, central in the 1996 elections, seemed to the voters rather remote and marginal at a time when large parts of the population were concerned only with trying to make a better living.

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<sup>11</sup> Ami Pedahzur, 'The downfall of the national Camp? in Israel Affairs, vol.7, no.2&3, winter/spring p.46-47.

Two months before the elections it was clear that Barak was focusing his campaign on economic and social issues and deliberately muting his position regarding the peace process. One popular security message that Barak chose to use was his promise for a withdrawal from Lebanon within a year, a message that was positively accepted by a wide range of constituencies. Barak had a profound basis for his campaign strategy and especially for putting social and economic issues at the top of his list. A survey among a sample of 1,000 Israelis indicated that 58 percent of the total population and 31 percent of Netanyahu's voters in 1996 felt that Israel's economic situation was deteriorating under Netanyahu's leadership, 33 percent asserted that their own financial situation had become worse. Among them were many of Netanyahu's previous constituencies.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, in the eyes of the more hawkish voters, Netanyahu's attempt to adopt a tough image during his election campaign seemed rather pitiful, following the handshake with Arafat as well as the Hebron and Wye agreements. At the same time, Barak, a former chief of staff, and one of Israel's most decorated soldiers, who used his military record to his advantage during the campaign, couldn't have been considered as a dove. He also did not suffer from a bad public image over his reliability as a

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<sup>12</sup> Source: A survey conducted by the Gallop Institute and Maariv. Maariv', 26 March 1999 in Pedahzur, I Ami 'The Downfall of the Nation Camp? in *Israel Affairs*, vol.7, no.2&3, winter/spring, 2001.

leader, as Netanyahu did. A striking fact was that many of the National Union supporters, including the well-known rabbi, Yoel Ben-Nun, declared that they would rather support Barak than Netanyahu since Barak's views regarding in the peace process could not change as often as did Netanyahu's.<sup>13</sup>

As far as the use of personality factor in campaign was concerned, Netanyahu was viewed as a unique prime minister for his ability to antagonise so many people and organisations and to make bad choices on many different levels. Netanyahu's Cabinet was unique in Israel's recent political history because of the number of ministers, most of them members of the prime minister's party, who left the government as a result of continued disagreements and high levels of mistrust in the prime minister. The list of retiring ministers was very long, beginning with Benny Begin and then Dan Meridor, David Levy, leader of Gesher, and finally Yitzhak Mordechai. All these people who were previously close to Netanyahu, left the Cabinet only because of the way it was run by the prime minister. Other Likud *Knesset* members and leading activists left the party for the same reason-Netanyahu.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ami Pedahzer, 'The Downfall of the National Camp? on *Israel Affairs*, vol.7, no.243, winter/spring/2001, p.47.

<sup>14</sup> Ozly Azulay Kartz, 'The Man who Defeated Himself', TelAviv, Yediot Ahronot Books, 1999, pp.89-94, 97-103. (Translated in English).

Media too, was not supporting Netanyahu. When one of the television channels initiated a televised debate among the three leading contestants, Barak did not show up, leaving Mordechai to confront Netanyahu by his aggressiveness. Barak could evade television confrontations with Netanyahu because of the wide support of almost all of the mass media. The media did not present Barak's failure to appear as cowardice. Furthermore, Netanyahu's readiness to participate in a confrontation with Barak was described as an additional sign of Netanyahu's showmanship in contrast to a real leader such as Barak.

### **Election Results**

On 17 May 1999, Israel went to the polls to elect the 15<sup>th</sup> *Knesset* and the prime minister. Out of 4,285,000' eligible voters,<sup>15</sup> 3,309, 494 Citizens Cast their ballots,<sup>16</sup> making this election consistent with the usually high Israeli turnout figures of close to 80 percent. Barak won the elections with a margin of more than 12 percent of the votes, a margin much more impressive than the less than 1.0 percent margin between Netanyahu and Peres in the 1996 election. In order to understand Barak's success, the comparison of Barak's success with Netanyahu gave following figures. Netanyahu had defeated Peres in 63 out of the 88 Jewish cities and

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<sup>15</sup> According to data reported in 'Ha'ariv' 12 May, 1999, p.3.

<sup>16</sup> Based on Compilation of Official *Knesset* figures for party votes.

towns.<sup>17</sup> Barak won in 44 out of those 88 cities and towns. The two localities which became new towns by 1999 were Elad (an ultra orthodox community) in which Netanyahu gained 97 per cent and 'Modi'in which Barak won 65 percent. Thus, each of the contestants won in 45 cities and towns. The tie between Barak and Netanyahu was in stark contrast to the clear-cut victory of Netanyahu over Peres.

Barak won in all 25 cities and towns in which Peres had won in 1996,<sup>18</sup> and succeeded in capturing 19 cities and towns where Peres had lost in 1996. Bat-yam Holon, Acre, Mevaseret Zion, Azor, Givot Shmuel, Neshet, Kiryat Yam, Yahud, Nes Ziona, Rehovot, Ganui Tikva, Eilat, Binyamina, Ma'alot, Nahariya, Nazareth Tlit, Atlit and Kadima.

It should be emphasised, however, that in many sectors it was Netanyahu that led the 1999 race. Thus, Netanyahu won Jerusalem with a margin of 64.5 to 34.5 per cent, the newer cities with a margin of 57.5 to 42.5 per cent, and the settlements in the West-Bank (81.5 to 18.5 per cent). Barak achieved his best results in the Kibbutzim (93.0 to 7.0 per cent), in the settlements with Arab majority (94.5 to 5.5 per cent), and in the veteran cities (56.5 to 43.5 per cent).

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<sup>17</sup> Gioza Goldberg, 'The Electoral Fall of the Israeli Left' in Elazar and Sandler, *Israel at the Polls 1996*, pp.53-72.

<sup>18</sup> Giora Goldberg, 'The Israeli left in the 1999 Election' in *Israeli Affairs*-vol.7, no.2&3 winter/spring 2001, p.29.

Ehud Barak's victory came as a result of dissatisfaction with the Israeli prime minister Netanyahu, internal cleavages and acrimony within Israeli society and its political culture, and a perceived worsening of Israel's international and regional environment. Netanyahu antagonised his party, coalition and voters. However, a skilful campaign by Barak helped to maximise the challenges strength while minimising his weaknesses.

**Table IV**

**Elections of the prime minister**

29 May, 1996	17 May, 1999
Eligible voters 3,933, 250	Eligible voters 4,285,428
Voters 3, 121,270 (79.4%)	Voters 3,372,952 (78.7%)
Valid Voters: 2,972,589 (95.2%)	Valid votes; 3,193,494 (94.7%)
Invalid Votes : 148,681 (4.8%)	Invalid Votes: 179, 458 (5.3%)
Candidates votes %	Candidate votes %
Netanyahu 1,501,023, (50.5%)	Barak-1,791,020 (56%)
Peres 1,471,566 (49.5%)	Netanyahu 1402,474 (43.9%)

Sources: Diskin, A., 'New Political System of Israel', in *Government and Opposition*, vol.34 (4), Autumn, 1999, p.505.



**Table V**

***Knesset Election***

14 <sup>th</sup> <i>Knesset</i>			15 <sup>th</sup> <i>Knesset</i>		
List name	Votes	Seats	List Name	Votes	Seats
Labour	818,741 (26.81%)	34	Labour	670,484 (20.3%)	26
Likud	767,401 (25.11%)	32	Likud	468,103 (14.2%)	19
Shah	259,796 (8.5%)	10	Shah	430,676 (13.0%)	17
<i>Meretz</i>	226,275 (7.4%)	9	<i>Meretz</i>	253,525 (7.7%)	10
Rus Yisrael B'aliya	174,994 (5.7%)	7	Yisrael B'aliya	171,525 (5.2%)	6
NRP	240,271 (7.9%)	9	Shinui	167,748	6
Aguda	98,657 (3.2%)	4	Centre	165,748 (5.0%)	6
ADP	89,541 (2.9%)	4	NRP	140,307 (4.2%)	5
Moledat	72,002 (2.4%)	2	Aguda	125,741 (3.8%)	5
Hadash	129,455 (4.2%)	5	Ra'am	114,810 (3.5%)	5
Third Way	96,974 (3.2%)	4	Nat. Unity	100,181 (3.0%)	4
Others	78,550	0	Israel our	86,153	4

	(2.7%)		home	(2.6%)	
Total	3,052,130	120	Hadash	87,022 (2.6%)	3
	(100.0%)		Balad	66,103 (2.0%)	2
			Am Ehad	64,143 (1.9%)	2
			Pnina Rosenblum	44,953 (1.4%)	0
			Pensioners	37,525 (1.1%)	0
			Green leaf	34,029 (1.0%)	0
			Third way	26,290 (0.8%)	0
			Greens	13,292 (0.4%)	0
			Other lists	41,004 (1.2%)	0
			Total	3,309,416 (100.0%)	120

Source: Diskin, A., 'The New Political System of Israel', in *Government and Opposition*, vol. 34(4), Autumn 1999, p.506.

Table VI

Preferences of prime ministerial Candidates in the 1999 Elections percent

The preferred party	Netanyahu	Barak	Other	Total
One Israel	0.8	93.8	0.4	100.00
Likud	93.9	5.3	0.8	100.0
<i>Shas</i>	82.2	10.0	7.8	100.00
<i>Meretz</i>	2.2	96.6	1.2	100.00
Yisrael B'aliya	40.0	48.6	11.4	100.00
Shinui	26.8	61.0	12.2	100.00
Centre	16.4	71.2	12.4	100.00
NRP	85.7	9.5	4.8	100.00
Yahadut 'Ha' Torah	96.2	3.8	0.0	100.00
Ra'am	0.0	52.8	38.0	100.00
National Unity	97.6	0.0	2.4	100.00
Israel our	94.4	5.6	0.0	100.00

Home				
Hadash	4.3	87.0	8.7	100.00
Balad	5.6	72.2	22.2	100.00
Am Ehad	29.4	52.9	17.7	100.7

Source: Diskin, A. 'The New Political System of Israel' in *Government and Opposition*, vol.34 (4), autumn, 1999.

## Analysis

*The Knesset elections of 1996 and 1999 marked a major fragmentation of the Party System. The number of lists that gained representation in the 14<sup>th</sup> Knesset of Israel reached a peak of 15. Moreover, some of these parties are, in fact, electoral coalitions of several parties. Thus one of the new MKs of Israel Ahat was a leader of Meimad-a moderate, quite dovish religious party. The two other members of One Israel were members of Geshet-a party that joined forces with Netanyahu's Likud in 1996 elections. Thus the effective number of electoral parties rose from 6.7 in 1996 to 10.3 in 1999 and the effective number of parliamentary parties rose from 5.6 to 8.7.<sup>19</sup>*

*The representation of two lists of candidates Labour and Likud combined decreased from 66 in 1996 to only 45 in 1999. At the peak of their power, in 1981, the two major lists controlled 95 Knesset seats. The poor showing of the two larger parties in both of the 1996 and 1999 elections was to be one more reflection of the larger pattern of nation-wide 'sectoralisation' in the voting patterns in the past two general elections. The poor performance of the Jewish (Zionist) parties in the Arab sector mirrored the success of the Arab parties. Only one Jewish Party, Shas did*

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<sup>19</sup> A. Diskin, 'New Political System of Israel' in *Government and Opposition*, vol.34 (4), Autumn, 1999, p.507.

better than in previous elections receiving 4.1 per cent of the Arab vote compared to 1.3 percent in 1996. The big losers were the centre and left, of-centre parties. One Israel and *Meretz* whose share of the Arab votes declined from 16.7 to 7.7 per cent from 10.0 to 5.2 per cent respectively.

*The most spectacular outcome of the result was the Shas-Phenomena.* The *Shas* party, which went from 10 to 17 seats in this election, became a fulcrum for expressing disappointment and alienation among Sephardi religious and traditional Israelis who felt long-standing grievances based upon perceived discrimination. *Shas's* growth was the most spectacular advance made by any party in the elections. Not only did *Shas* speak to the hearts of mainly alienated Sephardim, but it also used funds received from Netanyahu government to provide services for its constituents or potential constituents, and used its control of the interior ministry to win minority votes including those of Arabs and Druze, also political outsiders. The *Shas* leader Aryeh Deri was accused of getting kickbacks from a Yeshiva which received governments fund and using them for his own personal enrichment which included the purchase of a luxury apartment in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem District Court found Deri guilty of five counts of bribery, fraudulent, receipt of funds, and violation of the public trust. Deri's conviction and sentencing seems to have produced a spirit in the party's vote. Part of this voter surge was credited to

a 90-minute videotape entitled, *J'accuse'* featuring Deri attacking the establishment and defending himself.

Finally, it is interesting to note that although both Likud and its leader Netanyahu suffered a defeat in the 1999 election; the parties of the outgoing coalition continued to hold exactly one half of the *Knesset* seats.

### **Post-election performance**

Barak, the elected prime minister presented his coalition government to the *Knesset* on 6 July 1999. Only three days before the statutory limit which if not met, would have forced new elections. The Barak coalition, when sworn in, was made up of seven lists of candidates'- One Israel. *Shas*, *Meretz*, *Israel B'aliya*, the Centre Party, NRP and UTJ. These political parties together held 75 seats in the *Knesset*.

As the winning margin of Barak was huge it was expected that this coalition government would last long. But it did not happen so. It was full of instability. The main idea behind the introduction of the direct prime minister election was to have a stable government. Within less than twenty-four hours after the new government was presented, the *Yisrael B'aliya* was split by two MKs. On going dispute between *Shas* and the government over the allocation of funds for *Shas*'s education proposals regularly threatened Barak's coalition.

On 8 March 2000 the Deputy prime minister and Minister of Transport, Yitzhak Mordechai, took a leave of absence from the Government pending a police investigation into allegations of sexual harassment made by a female ministry employee. Although Mordechai vigorously denied the claims' in late May he was arraigned on three charges of sexual harassment. Mordechai subsequently resigned as leader of the centre party, as well as from the Cabinet.

In mid-June 2000 Barak faced another crisis when four *Shas*'s ministers resigned. After 10 days of political chaos, these ministers withdrew their resignation, after Barak capitulated to virtually, all of the party's demands-extra cash injection for 15 religious schools, the legislation of its private radio network, and a greater say for the party in the peace process. Thus blackmailing was on. On 9 July 2000, the eve of Barak's departure for camp David, the three right wing and religious parties in his coalition carried out their threat to leave the government in protest at Barak's readiness to concede Israeli territory to the Palestinian Authority.

The resignation of six of his Cabinet ministers (from *Shas*, the NRP and Israel B'aliya including the Minister of the Interior and leader of Israel B'aliya Natan Sharansky) left Barak who was preparing to leave for a crucial Summit meeting on the peace process with a seriously weakened government. Foreign Minister David Levy too refused to attend the Camp



David Summit. Likud brought a 'no confidence' motion but Barak's government survived, narrowly. David Levy finally resigned from the cabinet protesting against the concessions made to the Palestinians by Barak.

Due to fall out at camp David Summit the al-Aqsa intifada erupted rapidly. Barak tried to form a national emergency government with the participation of Ariel Sharon. Earlier Sharon had been selected as the leader of the Likud following Netanyahu's defeat and resignation. But Sharon insisted on veto to any moves to revive peace talks with the Palestinians. On 28 November 2000, Ehud Barak unexpectedly announced that he would resign in order to seek early re-election to the premiership in 60 days. Barak formally resigned as prime minister on 9 Dec. 2000, and a prime ministerial election was set for 6 February 2001.

## Chapter V

### SPECIAL PRIME MINISTER ELECTION 2001

In 1996 prime ministerial election, the verdict was fractured and Netanyahu won the election by a narrow margin. But in 1999, Barak won by more than 12 per cent margin. It was expected that it could be a stable government but due to persistent instability his government collapsed. After the resignation of Barak as prime ministerial election was set for 6 February 2001.

The Labour Party swiftly chose Barak, who remained the acting Premier, as its candidate. Despite speculations former Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu was not keen to contest the elections. Being a non-member of the *Knesset* he was not eligible to contest<sup>1</sup> and he urged the *Knesset* to vote for its dissolution. With many MKs not sure of retaining their seats, the *Knesset* voted against its own dissolution and thus avoided a general election. Barak's main challenger from the other side of the political spectrum was the 72 years old Likud leader. Ariel Sharon, who was well known for his hard line policies.

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<sup>1</sup> Eventhough in December 2000 the law was amended, Netanyahu was not prepared to contest the election while the *Knesset* remained fractured.

## **Campaign:**

The basic issues of the 2001 special direct election's campaign centred on peace process, the on-going *intifada*, personality factors, economic and social issues and the relevance of direct prime ministerial election. It can be divided into positive and negative campaigns.

Barak's main focus was on the peace-process and the fate of Israel.<sup>2</sup> This was evident in his decision to hold marathon talks in Taba just two weeks before the vote. Ministers in Barak's own Cabinet castigated them as an "inappropriate and "unethical" electoral ploy and compared them to "a loaded gun" pointed at the country, while polls revealed that even should an agreement be reached it would be voted down in a referendum.<sup>3</sup> However, talks failed. Unable to seek reward for successful domestic performance or to deliver a deal with Palestinian, Barak was forced to anchor it in the attempt to rally the electors to a compelling vision of peace and to persuade them that all current setbacks should be disregarded. Barak in his first broadcast of the TV campaign asked the voters to vote for him in spite of his record, for the sake of "the most important goal-peace". This, he claimed was the mission he had pursued throughout "my entire life, not

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<sup>2</sup> Deboireth Sontag, 'Israel in the Homestretch: Still Surreal', *The New York Times*, 31 January 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Smith Polls, *Jerusalem Post*, 27 December 2000.

just as a prime minister... if you shall give me the chance, I will do it better. I will be more attentive and do all that is my power to win your trust.<sup>4</sup>

While Sharon stressed that peace could be accomplished through security.<sup>5</sup> An even greater emphasis was laid on the call for national unity and the need to put an end to all social and political squabbling. How this would be accomplished was not defined and thorny issues like the relations between the secularists and the ultra orthodox or the communitarian parties representing them were ignored. However, Barak talked about a series of reforms which would address secular needs at the expense of orthodox interest.<sup>6</sup>

On the Palestinian issues Barak repeated the familiar positions concerning the moral and strategy perils of ruling other people and the inevitability of painful compromises. If there was a new element, it consisted of the argument that the conflict is a non-zero-sum game in which both sides would pay an escalating price for the attempt to delay the inevitable. Sharon had stressed that first priority is Israelis security and through this security he suggested, Israel can travel the road of peace.

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<sup>4</sup> Israeli Broadcasting Authority, TV Channel 2, 16 January 2001. in *Israel Studies Forum*, vol.17, no.1, Fall 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Nagourney, 'American Consultant makes, his own comeback in Israel', *The New York Times*, 8 February 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Ha'aretz, 21 January 2001. In <http://www.israel.mfa.gov.il/news/results.html>.

On the question of direct prime minister who enjoyed the presidential like strength, the arguments of both Barak and Sharon had basic similarities. Employing highly emotive images, each warned of the danger the other would pose if allowed to exploit the presidential like strength of the prime minister to advance his dangerous agenda without the breaks which limited the executive under the old Parliamentary system. At the same time, both vowed to act against the division that significantly weakened the prime minister and caused government to become paralysed. Though neither addressed the democratic system as such, both echoed thereby the feeling that something had gone wrong.<sup>7</sup>

Negative campaign was attacks launched by the two candidates on each other, which provided mirror images of one another. Both directed the voters to base their preferences on a negative evaluation of what their opponent had done in office. Barak devoted 21 per cent net broadcasting time to the criticism of Sharon as a minister under Menachem Begin responsible for the war in Lebanon, and Sharon 15 per cent to hold Barak responsible for the current security situation. However, as Downs-Anthony argued<sup>8</sup>, assessment of past performance allows the rational voter to project what competitors will do in office. Such estimations are faster and easier to make than the analysis of party platforms and ambiguous statements made

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Mendilow, 'The electoral Campaign of 2001 and the weak strong prime minister Syndrome, Department of Political science, Rider University. P32-33.

<sup>8</sup> Downs Anthony, *An Economic theory of Democracy*, New York, Harper and Row, 1957.

in the heat of the contest. They also give relevancy to character and to past events which otherwise would have been aimless.

Barak devoted most of his time to Sharon's adventurism which, as a 'strong' prime minister lacking effective controls, could led to the deterioration of the state's standing in the world and the risk of regional war. Sharon for his part stressed to a constant reminder that what lay at the bottom of the present to trouble was the structure of Barak's behaviour-to say one thing and do the other. This caused him to betray the citizens, including his own party members. He added in the second term, with such a prime minister continuing to act according to his whims Sharon repeated the familiar Likud theme of the danger to Jerusalem. He also raised the spectre of the return of the Arab refugees of 1947-8. Since, Barak, had no 'red lines' his presidential-like strength would allow him to come in to Palestinian demands, spelling the end of Israel.<sup>9</sup> Sharon also criticised Barak for the deteriorating economic growth and increasing unemployment. There were 208.5 per cent/1000 people unemployed in 1999, which reached to 213.8/1000 people in 2000.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Mendilow, 'The Electoral Campaign of 2001 and the Weak Strong prime minister Syndrome, Department of Political Science, Rider University, p.36.

<sup>10</sup> ILO year book of Labour Statistics.

## Election Results

The special prime minister Election was held on 6 February 2001. Ariel Sharon got 62.58 percent of the votes, compared with 37.42 percent of Ehud Barak. Total number of people voting was 2,664,225. Voter turnout was some 61%, down from 78.7 per cent in the 1999 *Knesset* and prime ministerial elections. The figure was the lowest in the history of the state, but this was also the first time only the prime minister was elected. Sharon won 1,618,110 votes, compare with 967,760 for Barak. In 1999, Barak won 179 million votes meaning the drop this time was 4.6 per cent.<sup>11</sup>

Sharon won a crushing victory in Jerusalem of 77.8 per cent with Barak only garnering 22.1%. In 1999 Benjamin Netanyahu won 64.5 per cent of the vote. Barak barely carried Tel Aviv-Jaffa by 51.9 per cent and Haifa by 22.5 per cent votes. In both cities where there is large Arab population, voter turnout was a low 59 percent. Almost all other towns and settlements gave a large majority to Sharon. Sharon was 62.8 per cent in Rehovot, 67 per cent in Petah Tikva, and 70 per cent in Beersheva.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il/new/result.html>

**Table VII****Election 2001 Result**

Place	Ariel Sharon	Ehud Barak
Tel Aviv	52	48
Bnei Brak	93.5	6.5
Ramat Gan	53	47
Jerusalem	78	22
Haifa	50	50
Kiryat Shmona	75	25
Katzrin	68	32
Beersheba	71	29
Holon	62	38
Herzliya	48	52
Petah Tika	68	32
Netanya	71	29
Rishon Lezion	58.5	41.5
Ra'anana	46	54
Ashkelon	74	26
Tiborias	84	16
Beitshe'an	88	12
Hadera	70.5	29.5
Ramle	81	19
Afula	75	25
Zichran Ya'acov	52	48
Karmiel	62	38
Metulla	41	59



Akiva	86	14
Margaliyot	70	30
Daliat al-Carmel	46.5	53.5
Givatayim	40	60
Ramat Hasharan	38	62
Hod Hashran	49	51
Savyon	40	60
Kfar Shmaryahu	25	75
Modi'in	54.5	45.5
Lod	79	21
Kirgat Malachi	86	14
Sderot	85	15
Ashdod	75	25
Tuba	6	94
Ummel-Fahm	7	93
Nazareth	11	89
Sakhnin	26	74
Arava	9	91
Abu Ghosh	28	72
Psagot	100	0
Ma'aleh Adumin	90	10
Ariel	92	3
Gaza Settlements	87	13
Agriculture Settlement	42	58
Kfar Malal	32	68
Moshavim	58	42
Kibbutzim	12.5	87.5
Druse Villages	41.5	58.5

Beduin Villages	18	82
Golan Settlements	61.5	38.5
Settlements	89	11
Jews Total	64	36
Arabs total	26.5	73.5

Source: The Jerusalem Post Thursday, Feb. 8,2001.

Kibbutzim gave 75 per cent of their votes to Barak, while Sharon won the Moshavim by a 15 per cent margin. The embattled settlements of Psagot in West Bank and Kfar Darom in Gaza gave Sharon 100 per cent of their votes.

In the Jordan valley, there was more support for Barak. The settlement of Naomi, near Jericho, gave 56 per cent to Sharon and 43.9 per cent to Barak. Mitzpach Shalem, a Kibbutz in the northern Dead Sea region, split its vote 67-32 per cent in Sharon's favour.

Barak won his hometown of Kochav Yair, but support for him there had dropped substantially from 71 per cent to 54.8%. The Bedouin town Rahat voted 82.5 per cent for Barak and 17.4 per cent for Sharon. Barak also did well in affluent communities such as Maccabim-Reuts, where he won 67 per cent and in Savyon, where he took 64%.

The warnings by Central Election Committee Chairman Justice Mishal Cheshin that casting blank ballots would be a waste of time because

they are not valid apparently had an impact. There were 78,385 invalid votes compared with 179,458 in the 1999 prime ministerial Election.

Less than 25 per cent of Arab votes came to the polls compared with more than 70 per cent in 1999.

In all Jewish sectors there was a drop of 11 per cent in turnout. In Arab Sectors with a high voting rate, turnout was 28%, down from 85 per cent in 1999. In Arab areas with a lower voting rate, the drop was from 52 per cent to 18%.<sup>12</sup>

### **Evaluation**

The February 2001 elections contest between Barak and Sharon set quite a few precedents. It was the first suffrage of the third millennium; the first separate match for the executive in the history of the country; the first national ballot in which less than 63 percent of the registered voters took part; the first competition in which a participant garnered more than 60 per cent of the vote and the list is by no means exhaustive.<sup>13</sup>

The defeat of Barak attributed to many factors. In fact Barak alienated people, his own party, coalition-colleagues, and Israeli Arabs.

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<sup>12</sup> Jerusalem Post, Thursday, February 8, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Mendilow, 'The Electoral Campaign of 2001 and the 'Weak Strong prime minister Syndrom'', Department of Political Science, Rider University, p.23.

Barak was elected in a wave of optimistic expectations not only for peace but also for sweeping domestic changes. Yet the opposing pulls in the coalition precluded any decisive change in the *Status quo*. This in effect meant that the subordination of the social and economic visions he had offered in 1999 to the pursuit of final peace deals. The failure of the peace efforts consequently magnified the widespread sense that Barak had let his voters down.

The occurrence of the 'al-Aqsa 'intifada' fuelled the unrest of the Israeli people. The fall-out from the Camp David Summit of July 2000 formed the background to a new uprising by Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza strip, which swiftly became known as the al-Aqsa intifada. During the tenure of Barak government Israel failed to reach a single agreement with the Palestinian Authority over any of the major contentious issues, such as the question of Palestinian refugees, Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, the status of Jerusalem, or permanent borders between Israel and the territories. Moreover, while no further redeployment of Israeli troops was implemented, there was a substantial increase in the number of Jewish settlers living in the West Bank.

On 28 September 2000, Ariel Sharon led a group of Likud *Knesset* members into the Haram ash-Sharif compound, under heavy police escort. Sharon attempted to enter the Marwani Mosque but was barred by some

200 Palestinians, who protested in front of the building. After Sharon and his entourage left, Palestinians scuffed with and threw stones at the estimated 1000 Israeli riot police deployed around the al-Aqsa compound. The al-Aqsa intifada rapidly escalated into the most sustained revolt by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza since their first spring of 1987-1993. Besides Sharon's visit, other causes of the Palestinian anger were the killing of seven Palestinians by Israeli border Police at the Haram ash Sharif on 29 September 2000 and the next day, the death of a 12 year old boy who was apparently hit by Israeli gunfire at the Netzarim junction in Gaza. Al-Aqsa intifada was widely seen as being Palestinian frustration at the lack of any improvement in their situation despite the seven year old 'Oslo Peace Process'.

At the same time the economic toll of the violence worsened an already bad unemployment situation.<sup>14</sup> During the first nine months of Barak's tenure the unemployment rate increased to 9%, some 10,000 more than in the final days at the Netanyahu government.<sup>15</sup> It threatened to erode what was gained in a year of renewed economic growth, frustrated hopes for future social and economic amelioration. Together they deepened the disillusion which made "Barak disappointed" one of the most effective slogans in Sharon's arsenal.

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<sup>14</sup> Ha'aretz, 19 December 2000 in <http://www.israel-mfa.govt.New/results.html>

<sup>15</sup> Jerusalem, National Bureau of Statistics, 10 November 2000.

Barak annoyed his own party. Barak's centralised management eroded the status of the leadership and rendered the party organs largely irrelevant, while the compromises and balancing acts necessary to appease coalition partners tended to clash with party interests. For examples, early in his region, Barak cut out of the peacemaking process most of his comrades, including figures like Shimon Peres who had negotiated the Oslo process. Now Barak found himself cut off from most of his colleagues and even though *One-Israel* leaders headed various campaign headquarters, there was little co-ordination among them and his headquarters. This undermined his capacity to mobilise the party behind him precisely when he stood on the verge of an electoral disaster.

Again in the words of Stanley Greenberg, "it was the worse case I ever encountered of a party-which is paralysed and non-functioning". Furthermore it was split and fragmented. By this he meant the unheard of situation in which an unofficial headquarter was formed in mid-campaign to promote the substitution of the party candidate by an alternative who had better chances, namely Peres. The "battle of the headquarters" lasted up to very homestretch and meant that Barak had to expend constant efforts on

internal squabbling and that expectations for his imminent resignation underscored the impression of a foregone conclusion.<sup>16</sup>

Barak lacked the coalition management and failed to keep it united. The inextricable link between his ability to conduct the affairs of the state and capacity to master the coalition's internal contradictions was prominently exposed by the incessant conflict between *Shas* and *Meretz*. For example, *Shas* wanted Internal, religions and education portfolios, *Meretz*, opposed it. *Shas* favoured Barak's negotiation on Palestinian issues and *Meretz* opposed it. *Meretz* was not a communitarian party, yet it essentially represented the views of the secular and western elite against which *Shas* as a representative of the ethnic and cultural interests of the traditionally minded Mizrahim, revolted. This rendered the battle between them especially bitter. Moreover, *Shas* regularly exploited its numerical leverage to induce the Prime Minister to intervene on its behalf by supporting the opposition time and again on issues that mattered him most. This allowed the Likud to embarrass the government again and again with one of the most dramatic cases being the choice of Moshe Katav as president over the internationally known Shimon Peres in 1999. And as if all this was not enough, constant mediation between the parties met only with temporary success. Satisfying neither side, it weakened Barak's

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<sup>16</sup> Uzi Dayan and Ariella Ringle Hoffman, 'The Street Battles of the Left', in *yediot Aharonot*, Weekend supplement, 19 January 2001, (translated in English at <http://www/Israelmfa.gov.il/nes/results.html>).

credibility weekend public confidence in his performance, and ultimately ended in both *Shas* and *Meretz* leaving the coalition.

Barak made all policy moves quite personally. He navigated with barely any consultation with any of his colleagues.<sup>17</sup> His frequent policy reversals which were not explained to the public and which failed to elicit wide political support gave credence to the accusation that his policies were made on the spur of the moment and lacked consistency.<sup>18</sup> For example, the sudden decision to hold the elections itself seemed to fit this mold. Secondly, the sudden decision to held negotiation with Ariel Sharon for the formation of a national unity government, later the contents of which were widely leaked to the media shows lack of consistency in his decision-making process. This type of his behaviour annoyed both his colleagues and his party.

An especially worrisome version of the problem related to the Israeli-Arabs. Here, too, the outbreak of violence exacerbated a sense that Barak had not fulfilled hopes and that he should be held accountable to his own government's failures. But at the start of his tenure the protest has been directed against his omission to take the Arab parties into any form of partnership and his disregard of the special interests of the community they represented. By contrast, the end his tenure saw the breakdown not merely

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<sup>17</sup> The New York Times, 8 February 2001.

<sup>18</sup> The Jerusalem Post, 9 February, 2001.



of the relationship between the Arab parties and the Israeli government, but between the Arab-Israeli minority and the Jewish majority following the unprecedented use of live fire by the police in the October 2000 demonstration in support of the on-going intifada in the territories.<sup>19</sup> Thus Barak lacked the support of Arabs.

On 6 February 80 per cent of the Arabs electorate in Israel refused to vote. The only slogan was the call to boycott the election from the committee of the Martyr's families (families belonging to persons who died in the Intifada) -"we will vote when our sons vote". Arabs make up 12 per cent of the Israeli electorate, or just over 500,000 out of 4.1 million voters.

In 1999, there was a 75 per cent turnout in the Arab Sector, with 95 per cent casting their votes for Barak. Each of three Arab lists in the *Knesset* either actively or passively endorsed his candidacy. On 6 February barely 20 per cent of the Arab electorate went to the polls, with a quarter of those voting for Sharon. All three Arab lists refused to endorse Barak's candidacy. The Islamist backed United Arab list called for an outright boycott, the communist-backed Democratic Front called for a blank vote and the nationalist al-Balad movement hovered somewhere in between. For Eli Rekhees, an Israeli expert on Arab Affairs, the depth of the Arabs boycott was "the hottest news of the Israeli election", overshadowing the

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Mendilow, 'The Electoral Campaign of 2001 and the 'Weak strong prime minister Syndrome, Department of Political science, Rider University, p.31.

size of Sharon's majority over Barak. The boycott ended the 53 years alliance between the Arabs minority and the Labour party.<sup>20</sup>

After winning the prime ministerial election Sharon immediately set about constructing a government of 'national Unity' but his Likud party could provide no more than 19 *Knesset* votes, clearly Short of the majority the prime minister elect needed to control the 120 member legislature Barak, meanwhile resigned the Party leadership. Labour's Central Committee after heated debates on 26 February 2001 voted to enter into a coalition with Likud. Sharon's 26 members government which was dominated by Labour, Likud and *Shas*, but also included representatives from rights-wing and religious parties, was presented for *Knesset* approved on 6 March 2001 and approved the following day. Labour Binyamin Ben-Eliezer was made Minister of Defence, Rechavam Ze'evi of the extreme right wing Haichud Haleumi as Minister of Tourism. The Key post of Minister of the interior was given to the leader of the more pragmatic ultra-orthodox *Shas* party Eliyahu Yishai, while Sharon himself was to hold the Immigrant absorption portfolio. Four Deputy Prime ministers were appointed Shimon Peres (Labour), Silvan Shalom (Liud), Natan Sharansky (Israel B'aliya) and Eliyahu Yishai (*Shas*). Possibly the most notable appointment was that of Labour's elder statesman and former prime

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<sup>20</sup> Middle East International 23 February 2001, p.19.

minister, Shimon Peres, as Deputy prime minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>21</sup>

On 7 March 2001, the *Knesset* voted for the dissolution of the direct prime minister election provision and back to the old parliamentary system, based on proportional representation.<sup>22</sup> Both Labour and Likud voted for it because it proved futile for them. It militated against the interests of the larger parties. At the same time the power of smaller parties increased drastically which have already been dealt in the previous chapters. This happened due to the nature of voting pattern, which helped voters to split their votes.

One of the sole ideas of electoral reform was to reduce the bargaining power of the smaller party and to make the prime minister independent to horse trading and blackmailing. But it did not happen. Both the Netanyahu and Barak governments were formed on the basis of horse trading and blackmailing. They always surrendered to the smaller parties to save their governments.

It was observed that a direct elected Prime Minister was less adhered to the party's policies and decision. The directly elected Prime Minister took own decision without consulting the party to which he/she belonged, on many important issues. For example, Barak did not consult

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.israelmfa.gov.il/news/rsults.html>.

<sup>22</sup> The Jerusalem Post, 8 March 2001.

either Peres or Labour on the issue of peace process. This undermined the power and prestige of the party. Thus it affected the party cohesion too.

The direct election of prime minister was introduced to provide effectiveness, stability and governability. But it could not happen. Instability haunted both Netanyahu and Barak and neither could complete their terms.

That is why the provision of the direct election of prime minister was scrapped.



## CONCLUSION

Israeli society is highly politicised and the level of public participation in the political process is among the highest in democratic societies. But in recent years there has been a marked decline in the public's faith in the political system and in its leaders. This erosion of confidence reached its nadir following the breakdown of the National Unity Government in the spring of 1990 and the scandalous behaviour of the political parties in attempting to form a new government. The paralysis of government and the abuse of power led to the widespread demand for an immediate change to the electoral system.

Many would maintain that the political system is suffering from a crisis of legitimacy and attribute to this the increased activism of extra-parliamentary groups, a growing impatience with the democratic process and a decline in the attachment to democratic values. One of the conditions leading to Praetorianism is a weak and ineffective political system.<sup>1</sup>

Israel's fragmented polity and its system of proportional representation (with only 1.5 percent threshold) have meant that no single political party has ever been able to win an overall majority in the *Knesset*. The change to the Basic Law has to be seen against the background of a

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Peter, 'The Nature of Israeli Politics and society' in Keith Kyle and Joel Peters (ed), *Whither Isrrael? The Domestic Challenges*, London, Touris & Co. Ltd. P7.

series of elections in which the two major party blocs Labour on the centre-left of the political spectrum and the Likud on the centre-right, won an almost equal share of seats, making the process of coalition-forming extraordinary difficult. The religious parties, in particular, who together have traditionally represented some 15 percent of the electorate, were able to exploit the situation to their advantage. The move to the direct election of the prime minister grew out of frustration with what was perceived to be—in the post-election coalition bargaining, the inordinate strength of the religious parties, relative to their actual share of the popular vote. Supporters of the reforms preferred to move the country to at least a partial constituency electoral system similar to that in Germany.<sup>2</sup>

When this initiative failed to achieve majority support, they assumed that a directly elected Prime Minister would be in a much stronger position to resist the extortionate demands of potential Coalition partners and at the same time restore a degree of integrity to what had become a sordid, unprincipled and undignified process of bazaar-style haggling.<sup>3</sup> The idea behind the direct election of prime minister was to make the prime minister bold enough to take independent decision and hence better governability and stability. But it proved only a Pandora box.

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<sup>2</sup> David Capitanchik, 'The Israeli General Election of 1996-Another upheaval?' in *Government and Opposition*, vol.31(4), Autumn, 1996, p.450.

<sup>3</sup> David Kretzmer, 'Warning: Constitutional Chaos Ahead', *Jerusalem Report*, 20 April, 1995.

The new electoral reforms could not weaken the power of the small tightly disciplined factions like Israel's religious parties. The candidates for prime minister took their supports both before and after elections. In 1996, indeed, in pre-election bargaining-to ensure broad support for the Likud leader Netanyahu brokered deals with Gesher leader David Levy and Tsomet head Rafael 'Rafal' Eitan guaranteeing realistic places for themselves and their supporters on a joint Likud-Gesher-Tsomet list the *Knesset* elections. As a result of these 'deals' bonafide Likud Candidates were displaced, causing considerable resentment in the Party. Similarly, in 1999 Barak also made pre-election deals with Gesher and Meimad. The agreement between the two parties assured Levy the position of foreign minister in a Barak-led government and three safe seats on the joint list. Barak made a deal with Meimad too, guaranteeing one safe seat and a ministership.<sup>4</sup>

In the post election scenario both Netanyahu and Barak had given enormous bargaining position to orthodox parties and allocated important portfolios like Internal Ministry, Social and Labour Welfare, Education etc. The most beneficiary and influential party was *Shas*.

Under Section 14, *The Basic Law: The Government* (1992), the prime minister elect must present his government to the *Knesset* within 45

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<sup>4</sup> Giora Goldberg, 'The Israeli Left in the 1999 Elections', in *Israel Affairs*, vol.7, no.2&3, Winter/Spring 2001, p.23-24.



days of the publication of the election results. Section 15(a) states that if he/she fails to do so within the stipulated time, then special elections would be held, i.e. a re-run of the election for the Primiership, but not for the *Knesset*. Under section 15(b), if he fails to form a government after a second attempt, he is disqualified from standing again.<sup>5</sup> Inevitably, these provisions give exceptional power to any small group whose support is necessary in order to form a government.

The double -ballot afforded by the electoral reform eliminated the need to choose between loose fitted large parties and more exclusive, tailor-fitted ones. Voters could now cast a vote to determine the leadership of the incoming government and another to serve their specific interests. The result was an increased fragmentation of the party system with a boost in the number of smaller parties and in their ability to draw voters away from Labour and the Likud.<sup>6</sup>

The number of 'lists of Candidates' that gained representation in the 14<sup>th</sup> *Knesset* of Israel reached a peak of 15. The 'effective number of elected parties' rose from 6.2 in 1996 to 10.3 in 1999 and the 'effective number of Parliamentary parties' rose from 5.6 to 8.7. By 1999 the two Larger parties, Labour and Likud, were left with less than either had in its

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<sup>5</sup> Allan E. Shapiro, 'Headed for Trouble', *Jerusalem Post*, 29 March 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Arend Lijphart, "In the Influence of Electoral Systems: Faulty Laws or Faulty Method", *Ibid.*, p.58.

heyday. The representation of the two large lists of candidates Combined decreased from 66 in 1996 to only 45 in 1999. At the peak of their power, in 1981, two major lists controlled 95 *Knesset* seats.

The parties, which drained away the power of the larger competitors, appealed to separate segments of the population and the consequence was that socio-economic, ethnic and religious cleavages were politicised and radicalised.<sup>7</sup> In 1996 Israel B'aliya made its debut with seven MKs and in 1999 it was joined by another 'Russian' Party which won four MKs on its own. In both elections *Shas* shot ahead: first to ten, then to seventeen MKs, thereby becoming the third largest party in the *Knesset*. Other new parties appealed to specific beliefs or interests Shinui, campaigning on the single issue of anti-ultra-orthodoxy won six MKs on its first showing in 1999, and in the same elections a party aggregating the interests of blue-collar Histadut members won additional two MKs.

On face of it, the direct election served only to accentuate the authority and personal mandate of the prime minister. But he was still obliged to form a coalition that would win *Knesset* confidence, and the party still had to serve him as a safe base from which negotiations with prospective partners could be conducted. The dwindling of the large parties into shadows of their former selves forced the prime minister to cobble

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Mendilow, 'The Electoral Campaign of 2001 and the 'Weak-strong prime minister Syndrom' in *Israel Studies*, vol.17, no.1, Fall 2001, p.27.

together unruly coalitions consisting of parties of different and at times opposing interests and obliged them to engage in constant bargaining with and mediation among the members under the threat of internal combustion. This sapped the steering capacity of both Netanyahu and Barak. Both prime ministers were subjected to cross pressures of parties pursuing particular interests.

It has been observed that during both Netanyahu and Barak the average economic growth rate was low at the same time the rate of unemployment had increased. Even at the peace front both the government failed and instability of government persisted which was marked by a series of resignation and scandals during Netanyahu as well as Barak tenures. For example, during Barak's period 27 Jan. 2000 a fine of 13.5 million new shekles was imposed on Barak's One Israel, for contravening of the legislation regarding party funding, although the prime minister himself disclaimed any responsibility for the origin of party funds. On 8 March 2000, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Transport, Itzak Mordechai was accused for sexual harassment of a female ministry employee. Both prime ministers alienated People, their parties, and coalitions. Moreover both the government could not complete their tenures. Thus they lacked effective and stable governability.

Since 1992 there was opposition to the electoral reforms. Since its introduction. It was the Likud Party who was against the electoral reforms

1992. In 1991 the governing Likud Party officially adopted a position opposing electoral reform, however it did not succeed in enforcing party discipline on the issue. So intense was the pressure exerted upon Likud members by the Party leadership that Uriel Lynn, the Likud Chairman of the Knesset's Law and the Constitution Committee and one of the bill's main sponsors, participated in the attempt to suppress it. Labour too, was not satisfied with the reform. Because it has lowered down the position of the Labour Party. In 1996, Netanyahu tried to remove or amend it by bringing a bill for such intention but he could not get the required support. However in March 2001, during the prime ministership of Ariel Sharon a bill for scrapping the direct prime minister was introduced in the *Knesset*, which was passed. Both Labour and Likud supported it because this system had militated against them.

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