

Israel's Election Outcome: Panicking or Politicking

I am not a political pundit, and I don't play one on TV, but as Israel goes about forming its next government following the vote for our 20th Knesset this week, there are many observations and projections that can be made and are interesting.

First, by all accounts, this was an electoral landslide for Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Likud party and generally a right of center political and religious constituency. Pre-election polls showed Likud trailing by as many as 4-5 seats out of the 120 seat total in the Knesset, and the immediate polls following the election called a dead heat between Likud and the Zionist Union. The Zionist Union campaign, "Anyone but Bibi" clearly didn't work as the Likud received 30 seats and the Zionist Union 24.

Next week, Israeli President Rivlin will confer with the heads of all the main parties and, based on the outcome, will be expected to tap Netanyahu and Likud officially to form the next government. That will usher in a season of political negotiations with other parties to see who will join the new government and under what terms. Though it is clear that negotiations have already begun.

Generally, parties will agree to enter a coalition government based on the number (and seniority) of specific cabinet and ministerial positions, diplomatic appointments, government budget for pet projects and institutions, and of course a common agenda or policy that all parties in the government need to adhere to. That's kind of like doing a rubrics cube with a few more colors than the six-faced cube allows. With competing agendas, there is never going to be a perfect fit.

Generally Netanyahu will have a month to form the government, but an extension is possible. With the Passover holiday upon us it's possible that an extension could be needed. To form a coalition, one needs to assemble at least a simple majority, in this case 61 Knesset members, as part of (or supporting) the new government.

Based on the result, Netanyahu should be able to form that with relative ease, taking in two parties that are typically right of center and nationalist, two ultra-orthodox religious parties, and a new party that is focused more on social issues and is headed by a former Likud government minister. This is the natural government to form, one that is largely homogenous and would be considered stable by Israeli terms. But Netanyahu might want to try to create a wider base of support among other centrist and social oriented parties to have wider backing which could help him politically, diplomatically, and practically.

As a big win for Netanyahu, he is on track to become Israel's longest serving prime minister, surpassing the current holder on that, Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben should also be in office when President Obama leaves office, which is probably a personal achievement about which he is happy given the animosity between the two and how it seems that the later actively campaigned to have the former defeated.

The election is also a big in for Israeli Arabs. The Joint Arab List, a combination of three political parties, has 12 of 13 new Knesset members who are Israeli Arabs (the one Israeli Jew is the head of the mixed Communist Party). The Joint Arab List also became the third largest block elected to Knesset, quite a feat in a country with a roughly 20 percent Arab population, and which is roundly criticized as being an "apartheid state." Also, excluding the religious Jewish parties, all other parties elected to the 20th Knesset have at least one Arab member. Overall, it's an increase in the total

Arab representation in the Knesset by nearly 30 percent.

Toward the end of the campaign, Netanyahu was quoted in an effort to get people to come out and vote for Likud, stating that left-wing groups (funded by V-15 about which more will be uncovered in the coming weeks) were busing Arabs to the polls. He was criticized as panicking and being racist, but it's not clear that he meant anything anti-Arab, as much as this was politicking to get out the vote for Likud. It's also not clear on Election Day how much that mattered.

The election was also a big win for women, with Israelis electing the largest number of women to serve in the Knesset ever.

With polls before the elections showing Likud trailing the Zionist Union by as many as 4-5 seats, and exit polls broadcast at 10:00 PM as the polls closed, shows that while Israelis are good at high tech, good at startups, and good at matters relating to defense, a beacon of freedom and democracy to the world and especially in the Middle East, and a light unto the nations, we are lacking in our polling accuracy. The one poll that was accurate however was the overwhelming number of Israelis who preferred Netanyahu as Prime Minister, and that's exactly what came about.

The dust still has to settle and the pundits are still making their projections. On a personal note, I enjoyed the post-election news coverage, including in a late night comedy show where lots of jokes made at the expense of just about everyone. Going on 11 years in this wonderful country, it was fun to be able to understand them all both in Hebrew, and culturally.

I still have my concerns and prayers are needed that this government will be guided, strengthened and protected by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But sitting in the Judean Mountains, I am just privileged to be living His promise and

raising my children in the center of Jewish life, where every vote matters and with each of our votes, we are part of building our future.

Jonathan Feldstein was born and educated in the U.S. and immigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for Charisma magazine's *Standing With Israel*. You can contact Jonathan at firstpersonisrael@.