

Israel prepares to vote

Victory for a right-leaning block is the most likely outcome of Israel's election.



The Israeli election campaign has culminated in a neck-and-neck dash between Binyamin Netanyahu of Likud and Tzipi Livni of Kadima. In the last hours of the campaign, before voting is due to begin on Tuesday February 10th, the candidates are battling against each other and against a pervasive sense that the race is, in effect, already over. Many voters expect that the right-leaning block of parties led by Likud will handily beat the leftist block led by Kadima, and believe therefore that it does not really matter who is first past the post on Tuesday night.

Opinion polls published on Friday—the last of the campaign—suggested that the gap was steadily narrowing between “Bibi”, who was expected to get 25 or so seats in the 120-seat Knesset, and Ms Livni with 23, give-or-take a couple. Surging into third place was Yisrael Beitenu, a far-right party with a strong Russian-immigrant flavour, led by Avigdor Lieberman. It was just shy of 20 seats, leaving Labour, under Ehud Barak, the minister of defence, in fourth spot with perhaps as few as 14 seats. All the polls predicted that Likud, Yisrael Beitenu, and four small rightist-religious parties would together muster 65 or more seats, whereas Kadima, Labour and their leftist allies would have 55 or fewer.

Ms Livni has made a last-minute appeal to Israelis, especially young people, who ideally would prefer to vote for Labour or for parties farther to the left than to give their support to the somewhat eclectic collection of Likud and Labour renegades that make up Kadima. The overriding objective, she argues, is to stop Mr Netanyahu. Her only chance of doing so is if she comes in ahead of him.

Ms Livni is understandably vague about the arithmetic that would underpin her bid, after the election, to be asked by the president, Shimon Peres, to form a government. The president (who is a long-time Labourite who went over to Kadima) has a certain amount of discretion under the law, but he must be guided by the preponderance of advice tendered by the various parties.

Plainly, barring a wholly unexpected upset, Mr Lieberman will be kingmaker after the vote. Several members of Labour (although not Mr Barak himself) have solemnly promised not to sit in a government alongside Mr Lieberman, whose anti-Arab platform they deem to be racist. Ms Livni has pointedly avoided any such disqualification. On the contrary, she and her lieutenants point out that Mr Lieberman served for a time in the outgoing Kadima-led government and they suggest that, once in office, his incendiary rhetoric tends to subside.

Ms Livni's hope is Mr Netanyahu's fear. He was at pains during the campaign's last hours to persuade right-leaning voters that they cannot afford the luxury of backing their various niche parties and thus risking that Likud will lose to Kadima. Mr Netanyahu needs to come first in the

poll in order to ensure that he gets the mandate from Mr Peres. In an effort to persuade waverers, Mr Netanyahu suggested that “A big Likud means a stable government”, with his message plastered on thousands of billboards across the country. “Big”, of course, is relative: Likud, it seems, will command less than a quarter of the Knesset seats. “Stable”, for that reason, is likely to prove relative, too. Observers predict that even if Mr Netanyahu does manage to cobble together a coalition it will not last for long, given the wide differences between its likely elements over important questions of policy.

This reflects a growing sense among politicians and the public that the electoral system itself—proportional representation with a 2% threshold for a party to enter the assembly—is demonstrably dysfunctional. This is Israel’s fifth election in a decade.

The most consistent and radical campaigner for constitutional reform is Mr Lieberman. He has long advocated changing to a presidential system with a fixed, four-year term of office that cannot be cut short by parliamentary machinations. (He does not conceal his vision of himself as a future president.)

He may make reforming the system a condition of joining a government. Given the likelihood that neither Mr Netanyahu nor Ms Livni will be able to form a government without him, electoral reform could thus become a burning issue in Israeli politics. That is unless the two front-runners set aside their rivalry and decide to govern together, each bringing his or her allies into the coalition tent and all combining to keep Mr Lieberman out.

The Economist, London, 9 fev. 2009, Middle East & Africa, online. Disponível em <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 11 fev. 2009.

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