

COMMENTARY

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“The Ballot is Stronger than the Bullet”

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The Israeli general election, scheduled for 17 March, can be fateful for the Israeli Arabs as their voting en masse could change the political map and potentially prevent Netanyahu from forming the next government. They can, and indeed must, defy all parties from the right-of-centre who do not wish them to have a voice, ostensibly because the Israeli Arabs cannot be trusted on matters related to peace and national security. But if the Israeli Arabs want equal distribution of resources to improve their socio-economic conditions, fully integrate into Israeli society, and contribute constructively to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, they must now fully exercise their right to vote and not squander this historic opportunity.

The number of Arab voters has dwindled in past elections, from 90 percent in 1955 to 18 percent in 2001, and up to just over 50 percent in the last election. This swing in voting was due to several important factors, including their frustration with the Israeli political system that does not allow much to change, growing complacency due to their general distrust of Israeli governments, and the inability to influence events.

In addition, Israeli Arabs have always been torn between their duty as Israeli citizens and their sense of affinity to their brethren in the West Bank and Gaza as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict grinds on. This is coupled with disappointment with their own leaders, which has further discouraged them from being politically active.

The convergence of several developments in this election has created an unprecedented opportunity for Israeli Arabs to vote en masse and potentially change the political landscape in Israel. To achieve that, the burden of the “get out the vote” campaign falls on the shoulders of their leaders, Israeli Arab mayors, and local Arab political activists.

As it is, the Israeli Arabs are more motivated to vote in this election, especially because of the growing acuteness of their socioeconomic problems, overt discrimination in job opportunities and education, and limits on building permits and neglect of infrastructure. Their strong desire to prevent Netanyahu from advancing the “Nationality bill,” which they consider to be racist, provides further impetus.

Although the formation of a joint list of all the Arab parties—Balad, United Arab List-Ta’al, Hadash and Raam—came about from self-preservation, it has nevertheless engendered new momentum.

Israeli political organizations from the left and left-of-centre, who vehemently want to deny Netanyahu another term, are also supporting the Arab list because the larger the number of Arab members in the Knesset, the wider the political base they will muster.

It is true that the Arabs are unlikely to vote in great numbers for Labour/Hatnua, partly because of the characterization of the party as the “Zionist Union” and partly because they are not a part of the political apparatus.

Nevertheless, the prospect of improving their condition and having a say in the political affairs of the country will depend to a great extent on the advent of Labour to power, which explains their tacit cooperation.

To be sure, the Israeli Arabs could be a deciding factor if parties on the right (led by Likud) lose some and the left (led by Labour) win some. Should they vote en masse for their own list, they have the potential of winning as many as 18 seats, emerging as the fourth or even third-largest party and becoming the “blocking bloc” that will prevent Netanyahu from forming a new government.

Even if Likud wins by a small margin over Labour, it is important to note that Israel’s President is not required to assign the leader of the party who wins the most seats to form the new government if he concludes that the left and left-of-centre bloc could have a majority vote. For this particular reason, how many seats Arab Knesset members win will matter greatly.

To achieve their objective, the Arab list must first and foremost put forth a political agenda and an effective action plan that appeals especially to the eligible Arab youth, who have been disenchanted and are desperate for meaningful change. Time is short and they must utilize every moment to promote their political agenda.

They must focus on how to improve the conditions of Israeli Arabs in all spheres, rather than merely criticizing other political parties. They should constructively engage their Jewish

counterparts in a dialogue about the future of the country and demonstrate loyalty to the state as their fate is intertwined with the fate of the country.

They must not be intimidated by the leaders of centre and right-of-centre parties, who refer to the Israeli Arabs as a fifth column whose main agenda is to destroy Israel. It should be noted that even though they are systematically discriminated against, 99 percent of Israeli Arabs prefer to live in a democratic Israel, where they at least enjoy equal rights before the law.

Their role now is to translate their constitutional rights into day-to-day equality between them and their Jewish counterparts by voting instead of complaining. As Abraham Lincoln is attributed as saying, "Elections belong to the people. It is their decision. If they decide to turn their back on the fire and burn their behinds, then they will just have to sit on their blisters."

In fact, Israelis from all circles of life lament the discrimination against the Arabs and feel strongly that for Israel to remain a vibrant progressive democracy with security, it must have true equality between all citizens. Equality, though, is a process, and however long it might take, it rests on the ballot and not the bullet, to quote Lincoln again.

Working closely with Labour now and after the election, the Israeli Arabs' struggle will continue. In the final analysis, regardless of who forms the next government, they must pursue a constructive path and not be drawn into a cycle of recriminations.

It is up to the Israeli Arabs to vote in this election and grasp the political power that reflects their numbers. They now have a momentous opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the state as responsible citizens who are ready to do their share and defy those Israelis who wish to see them disappear for 24 hours during the Election Day.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. **Web Link:** <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/ballot-stronger-bullet/>

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