Coalition negotiations: Avoiding a lose-lose outcome

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Post-election negotiations may be more important than the campaigns themselves, but in contrast to the detailed strategy involved in the latter, political leaders usually make up coalition-building strategies as they go along.

On the crucial questions of whether or not to enter a broad unity government, Kadima's head Tzipi Livni is setting the (largely

negative) tone in speeches and interviews, with little sign that she has seriously considered the costs and benefits of different options.

Livni may have rejected the unity government option for emotional or substantive reasons or, alternatively, she may in fact be interested in joining the coalition, but is playing hard to get.

The problem is that in these negotiations, as in other intense political bargaining processes, it is much easier to reach a flawed and irrational result than to find a "win-win" outcome in which everyone - particularly the public - benefits. Tough-sounding statements may be issued to get the best terms, but they can also lock leaders, parties and, most importantly, the country into bad outcomes.

History shows that inexperienced politicians often overestimate their bargaining power and do not consider strategy and tactics before entering the ring. Leaders get trapped by their own words and take untenable positions.

Like amateur poker players, overconfident politicians believe in their ability to turn an average hand into a strong one, using bluffs and bidding up the stakes. But at some point, the cards are turned over and the reality is revealed. In contrast, rational negotiating strategies and tactics require detached analysis and experience.

In theory, tactical discussions with smaller parties create alternatives to pressure larger partners into making concessions. But such tactical sideshows take on a life of their own and become the main event. Promises are made, ministries are discussed and it is increasingly difficult to reverse course.

Studies of negotiations have produced some rules for avoiding situations in which the process takes over, leading to unwanted outcomes.

For example, before starting, negotiators need to examine and prioritize the possible results. On this basis, they can select firm limits, so that the process does not take over and result in agreements which are actually worse than a stalemate. Red lines can also prevent each side from being trapped by emotions or bad tactics into refusing an advantageous deal.

IN CONSIDERING A UNITY government, these rules can still be applied, despite what appears to have been an irrational start. For their next meeting, Binyamin Netanyahu and Livni should each come prepared with realistic plans for a unity government, prepared by their respective teams. There will be large differences, as Kadima will overstate its demands, and Likud will seek to give it far less. From here, the real bargaining can begin.

Based on the almost equal election returns, logic would be to give each party the same number and approximate weight of ministries and other important positions (Knesset speaker, committee heads, etc.) This is consistent with the "generally accepted or objective criteria for agreement" of academic models.

For the three top positions, Netanyahu, as prime minister (he will hold this position with or without a grand coalition), could also be finance minister, Livni would stay on as foreign minister (a position that she loves) and the Defense Ministry could be maintained by Ehud Barak, with some of his Labor Party Knesset members. But this is only one of many possible ways of dividing the positions.

With regard to policies, the differences between the two parties were exaggerated in the election campaign, as is common in democracies.

The approaches of Kadima and Likud are pragmatic rather than ideological, particularly on economic and security issues, as well as on negotiations with the Palestinians and Syria. Until 2005, Netanyahu and Livni were both members of Likud, and the issue of unilateral disengagement, which led to the split and creation of Kadima, is moot following the failed Gaza experiment. Livni and some others in Kadima emphasize the limits of the status quo, but they are not part of the idealistic Left and are unlikely to enter another Oslo process. On this and other main challenges that the country is facing, the two parties can work together.

THE ALTERNATIVE FOR LIVNI and Kadima is to go into opposition, with the assumption that Netanyahu's "narrow right-wing government" will soon collapse. This may result from internal secular-religious disputes between Avigdor Lieberman and Shas, from pressure due to conflict with the Americans, fallout from the economic crisis or some other reason. But this is a risky strategy. Instead of turning to Kadima as an alternative, people may blame Livni for cynically blocking a strong government, and much needed electoral reform, and again giving smaller parties, including Israel Beiteinu, far more influence than the election results warrant.

The decisions facing Netanyahu and Livni are difficult, and they are also central to the country's future. To make sensible choices, coalition negotiations must be managed carefully and rationally, without emotion blinders or psychological distortions.

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