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Lessons from New Zealand's General Elections

Asmaa Shokr

The international and Arab media outlets have been keen to follow the New Zealand latest general elections (2020). After the Christchurch massacre, Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party, became more and more internationally renowned. This piece addresses the New Zealand general elections and the lessons that may be learned from such democratic experience; but before we proceed, let us first give a brief overview of New Zealand and its political life.

Where is New Zealand located?

New Zealand, a country located in the Oceania continent -a continent in the southwestern Pacific Ocean- is situated in the South Pacific Ocean, about 1,500km east of Australia and around 1,000km south of South Pacific Islands, such as Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, and others. Having no land borders with any other country, New Zealand is made up of two large landmasses called the North Island and South Island, as well as hundreds of smaller islands, most prominently the Stewart Island, the Chatham Islands, the Great Barrier Island and the Waiheke Island. New Zealand's closest neighbors to the north are New Caledonia, Tonga and Fiji, but it is the southernmost nation in Oceania. The country's name in the Maori language (language of indigenous people) means the lands of white clouds.

Political Life in New Zealand

Being a Commonwealth nation, New Zealand is a constitutional monarchy under England, belonging to Queen Elizabeth II, who became New Zealand's monarch on 6 February 1952, following the death of her father, King George VI, as the country's sovereign and head of state. However, the Queen and the governor-general -who represents the Queen and performs most of her domestic duties in her absence- are politically neutral and do not participate in the conduct of the day-to-day aspects of governance, despite being an integral part of the ruling process. New Zealand has its own parliamentary government and Prime Minister, where the executive power is based on the principle of (The Queen prevails, but the government rules). The government is formed by the parliament that is elected by the people, that is, government comes from the people of New Zealand.

The United Kingdom had granted New Zealand a constitution in 1852, when the latter was a British colony. But over the years most of its provisions and articles have changed.

New Zealand's Parliament

Members of the New Zealand House of Representatives are usually elected every three years, where every person, whether holding New Zealand citizenship or permanent residency, that has completed eighteen years of age, is entitled to participate in the election of the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers.

The House represents the legislative power, where it passes laws, provides ministers to form Cabinet, adopts the state's budgets, approves its accounts, and supervises all the work of government.

The [Economist's](#) Intelligence Unit ranked New Zealand as a "full democracy" in 2016. The country is highly ranked in terms of government transparency, where it has the lowest level of corruption in the world.

Political Parties

There are several political parties in New Zealand, but there are two major parties namely, the Labour Party (centre -left), led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (centre -right), and the National Party, led by former Police Minister Judith Collins. They are other parties such as the Green Party, the Opportunities Party, the NZ First Party, the New Conservative Party, and others.

Labour Party wins elections 2020

The New Zealand Labour Party led by Jacinda Ardern, the current Prime Minister of New Zealand, won a landslide victory in the country's legislative elections 2020, winning 49.1% of the vote (64 seats), and a rare outright parliamentary majority, ensuring that Ardern remains in office as Prime Minister for the second time in a row, while the opposition National Party won 26.8% of the electorate (35 seats).

Lessons to be learned

About two million New Zealanders, that is, about two-thirds of the electorate, participated in the early vote before Election Day, which enabled the Election Commission, an independent Crown entity set

up by the New Zealand Parliament, to rapidly count the votes immediately after the end of voting. This participation rate is extremely high and unprecedented, given that New Zealand's population amount to five million with almost half of the total population being eligible voters. Therefore, this statistic confirms the New Zealanders are well aware of the importance of the election turnout and its influence on the future of their country.

The Labour Party won 64 seats of the 120 seats in Parliament, the highest since New Zealand adopted the mixed-member proportional (MMP) voting system in 1996. However, the rest of the political parties did not accuse them of monopolizing power or dominating the parliamentary seats, and none of them was afraid of Ardern forming the first one-party government under the current system, due to their full awareness of the regulations and the Constitution.

Opposition leader Judith Collins did not wait for the vote count to finish; but after counting nearly 70 percent of the vote, Collins conceded defeat in a televised speech. "Congratulations on your result, which I believe is an outstanding result for the Labour Party," she said addressing Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Collins neither objected to nor questioned the election results because of her trust, as well as all other political parties, in the integrity of government institutions that oversee the electoral process, where there is no fraud or manipulation of the results because the New Zealand judiciary does not tolerate such acts, but rather are taken seriously regardless of the party involved.

After the victory of the Labour Party, under Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Ardern walked out of her home in Auckland, waving and embracing her crowded supporters. She did not ignore those who did not vote for her, but addressed her supporters saying: "New Zealand has shown the Labour Party its greatest support in almost 50 years. We will not take your support for granted. And I can promise you we will be a party that governs for every New Zealander."

Jacinda Ardern built her campaign on the success of her way of crisis management. Although the measures she has taken to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the economic situation, nevertheless they have been praised by the New Zealanders. The number of deaths because of the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand has not exceeded 25, which confirms existence of the crisis management skills in New Zealand on top of the people's priorities.

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The humanitarian handling of the Christchurch massacre in March 2019 raised the popularity of Jacinda Ardern outside New Zealand as well as at home, making her one of the most popular New Zealand leaders for decades, given that Ms. Ardern acted wisely and gained people's confidence as the government worked coherently in the face of the shocking incident.

Jacinda Ardern brought New Zealanders together during crises, both during the attack on the two mosques and during the coronavirus crisis. She has not adopted the "divide and rule" approach adopted by Arab regimes to ensure survival in power for the longest possible period of time.

