

Bye-Bye Bibi: Is It Time for Netanyahu to Go?

Unlike many Israelis, I am not spiking the ball or dancing in the end zone today. (Forgive the exclusive American cultural reference for those who don't follow U.S. football.)

Prime Minister Netanyahu—Bibi—is not public enemy No. 1. But his time to step down has passed, and that's why this week Israel announced a new “unity” government after four elections in two years.

It gives me no sense of pride that we've come to this point, particularly how this has transpired. As prime minister, there's no question that Bibi deserves enormous credit for many achievements, which many of his detractors refuse to do. However, it feels unusual that all the credit for all his achievements is his alone because of the paradox of one of his greatest failures: pushing away rather than cultivating successors. As much as anything, this led to his downfall.

For many, it's impossible to imagine anyone as prime minister other than Netanyahu. Most Israelis under 18 only know Bibi as prime minister. He's served in this position for 15 years, the past 12 consecutively. The same is true for many friends overseas.

Because of his accomplishments, because he's seen as synonymous with Israel and everything (or most of) for which Israel is great, it will be hard to imagine anyone other than Bibi as prime minister. That's especially the case with many Christian friends, whose support for Israel is ardent and unswerving, and who saw their love for Israel reciprocated by Bibi. That's not to say that others in his place would not have done the same, but Bibi has been in the driver's seat.

But Israel is bigger and greater than just one person. That's

true now, and has always been, for all of Israel's history. More than one person drained the malaria-ridden swamps, signed the Declaration of Independence and has fought our battles. I suspect many Israelis today are feeling the way Israelis did when Israel's then longest-serving founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, stepped aside.

I'm glad for the change, but a bit nervous. It didn't have to be this way. Bibi's behavior has proven that it's time, and I support the formation of a government that he's no longer leading. It's an added bonus that the ultra-Orthodox parties will be out of the coalition. They have led Israel and the communities they represent down a road that pushes Jews apart rather than bringing us together. Bibi has enabled this.

More than supporting this specific coalition, which includes the most left-wing parties in the Knesset, the ideologies of which leave me deeply concerned, I support the need for change. I'd have preferred a true right-wing coalition, free of religious coercion, where parties could have come together to lead in a way that's visionary, responsible and not pushed right-wing ideological or religious tenets down the throats of anyone.

The sad thing is that much of the situation which brought us to this point of ending Bibi's tenure is his own doing. Israel went through four elections in two years, suffering without a real government, a budget and an endless and divisive political season. Much of the responsibility for having these elections and not being able to form a stable government falls on Bibi.

When he did form a coalition last year that could have been stable, before the ink was dry on the coalition agreement, it was clear he had no intention to honor it. Eventually, what could have been a stable government failed, largely because of Bibi. Fourth elections were called, and Bibi failed to form a government again.

In the bigger picture, if Bibi hadn't pushed aside capable leaders and successors from within Likud, there might not be multiple parties in the incoming coalition founded by former Likudniks and Bibi supporters, who turned their backs on Bibi to compete rather than collaborate. He could have cultivated one stable right-wing block, with Likud leading nearly 50% of the Knesset.

It remains to be seen if any of these parties would merge back and their founders bring a more unified leadership back into the Likud fold. Ideologically, this would be a powerful political force that could dominate Israeli politics for decades. But it couldn't happen under Bibi's divisiveness.

Despite my support for the change, I am nervous about several things. I recognize that our enemies will try us. They may perceive this as a moment of weakness to exploit. Israel will have to respond forcefully and decisively, perhaps even more so than we would have until now. This could escalate. That may make the left-wing parties threaten to leave. It will place Raam, the Arab Islamist party also backing the new government, between a rock and a hard place. Will it withdraw its support, embrace harsh rhetoric or realize that now is the time for Arab Israelis leadership to support Israel defending itself, even among Palestinian and other Arab cousins, and craft a new middle road?

For the first time since the beginning of two-and-a-half years of political instability, many Israelis feel there is potential for a stable, maybe even unifying, alternative. What actually will happen is anyone's guess. The government could succeed wildly, beyond anyone's expectations, or fall apart quickly, leading to new elections anyway.

Preventing a fifth election is one of the pretenses for forming such a broad coalition to begin with. Maybe this will just delay the inevitable. If the parties to the new government cannot find a way to function together, or if they

behave as opposition factions undermining one another within the same government, they will fail.

Israel may have emerged from a political deadlock as we emerge from the pandemic. There can be any number of mutations that can set things back, but there's reason for hope this week as we take off our masks and take a breath of fresh air, literally and figuratively.

I pray that the leaders and members of the new government will be guided with divine spirit and purpose, and for the greater good and well-being of us all. May they succeed in a way that brings all Israelis closer and makes Israel stronger. {eo}

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