

Here's Why Netanyahu's Leadership in Israel Is in Jeopardy

Note: This is the second of a two-part article. For part one, [click here](#).

With little exception, the Likud party has been the dominant political force in Israel since Menachem Begin became prime minister in 1977. Others, like Ariel Sharon, broke away from Likud to form the Kadima party and even became prime minister (followed by Ehud Olmert), but for most of the past 40 years, Likud has been in control.

Has the pendulum swung all the way and is now swinging back? The polls are showing Likud still in the lead, but with a loss of some 20% of its support. Prime Minister Netanyahu has begun reaching out to segments of the population that he believes can be swung in his direction, albeit while losing ground to the right.

Numbers may change, but for now, it's unlikely that Netanyahu and Likud will receive enough votes to form a government and return him to the premiership. Here's why.

Fall of Likud

Polls are changing daily, but to give a sense of how far the Likud has dropped, have a look at the current parties and the number of seats they hold as compared to what current projections are (in parenthesis):

- *Likud*: 36 (27-29) reflecting more than a 20% drop.
- *Yesh Atid*: 17 (20).
- *Joint List*: 15 (8).

- Blue and White: 14 (4).
- *Shas*: 9 (6-8).
- *United Torah Judaism*: 7 (7-8).
- Yisrael Beiteinu: 7 (7-9).
- *Yamina*: 5 (11-12).
- Labor: 3 (5-6).
- Meretz: 3 (4).
- New Hope: (9-12).
- Ra'am: (4).
- *Religious Zionists*: (4-5).

If there are no drastic changes, Netanyahu and Likud will have no path to form a coalition. Even with Yamina, and the other parties that would reflexively join a government under him (in italics), they do not reach the 61 seats needed. Likud once led with as many as 48 seats in 1981 and sunk to as few as 19 and 12 seats respectively under Netanyahu's leadership. This significant drop could lead to Likud being out of power.

Mathematically, Yesh Atid, New Hope, Yamina, Yisrael Beiteinu, Labor and Blue and White could surpass 61 seats, even more if Meretz is added. However, the contortions needed to bridge interests and ideologies of some of the most right-wing and the most left-wing parties would be a herculean challenge, not to mention the egos and agreement who serves as prime minister.

The Arab Vote

Not included in the mathematics to form a coalition are the Arab parties. Historically, they have not supported the formation of a government for their own nationalistic reasons,

and the major national parties have not wanted or needed to seek their support. This red line has been widened in recent years with the Arab Joint List in many ways serving as a fifth column, actively supporting Israel's adversaries in many conflicts. Most recently, they rejected the Abraham Accords' heralding of peace and diplomatic relations with four Arab states.

A growing number of Israeli Arabs feel that the Joint List is not representing their interests, reflected in the drop from being the third largest party. This is underscored by Ra'am, the Arab Islamist party, running on its own. It's not clear if it will pass the threshold, but if it does, Ra'am brings another dynamic to the table that will be unique: the possibility of supporting the formation of a coalition, if not, in fact, being part of that in some way. Because Ra'am wants to be a player and not sit in (a hostile) opposition, it could easily throw its support behind either of the two camps' attempts to form a government, exacting a high "price" in the form of funding for the Arab community, government positions and more. For that reason, even Netanyahu has been actively courting the Arab vote. It's not unusual for Arabs to vote for and be part of Israel's major national parties. However, Arabs remember the prime minister's previous election day cry that the Arabs are coming out in droves as a ploy to get more right-wing voters to come out, and to peel off as many votes for Likud from ideological competitors. This time, the Arab vote remains one of the biggest wild cards.

Palestinian Authority Elections

Another Arab vote that has a looming impact is the Palestinian Authority plan to hold its first national election in over 15 years. Parliamentary elections are scheduled for May, followed by another election in the summer for Palestinian Authority president. However, in a society with no democratic tradition, there are any number of reasons why the election might not happen. Whether it happens or not, to the extent that there

are polls in the Palestinian Authority that might be accurate, these could cast a shadow on and impact the Israeli vote. Certainly, if the Israeli election is non-decisive and there's another vote in the fall, the outcome of a possible Palestinian Authority election will have an impact. Most Israelis are beyond the belief that the PA is a reliable partner as indicated by the strengthening of the Israeli right and near disappearance of the Israeli left. Yet with the glimmer of a chance for peace, Israel would still make concessions. But as bad or inept as the Palestinian Authority is now, the further radicalization of the Palestinian Authority with the emboldening of Hamas or other relative extremists will impact the Israeli electorate.

The Palestinian Authority also has a "passive" influence in that it's not uncommon to see a spike in Palestinian Arab terror and rockets prior to an Israeli election. Domestically, this tells Palestinian Arabs that they will continue to resist and fight Israel no matter who wins. But the ripple effect on Israeli voters has an impact that emboldens the right. An advantage of the pandemic is that there's been a drop in terror attacks such as stabbings, car rammings and rockets being fired. Nevertheless, with an election upon us, it won't be unusual for terrorists to try to have their "voice" heard and presence made on March 23.

Challenge from the Right

It's rare in a democracy to have an incumbent facing the strongest challenge to reelection from the same side of the political spectrum. However, the main challenge to Netanyahu and Likud this election is from the right. Gidon Sa'ar and New Hope won't join or support a government led by Netanyahu. Naftali Bennet and Yamina are keeping options open, so people are calling him "kingmaker." But mathematically, if he can't help Netanyahu form a government because they don't have enough votes anyway, the likelihood of Sa'ar and Bennett joining forces to form a government increases.

In parallel, both Sa'ar and Bennett have said they will not sit in a government led by Yesh Atid's Yair Lapid, and Lapid has said it's more important to have Netanyahu out than him become prime minister. While these red lines could change, one lesson from the failure of the last government is that when Benny Gantz broke his promise not to sit in a government under Netanyahu, and got played doing so, he lost credibility. His party now holds 14 seats and may drop to four, or not even make it past the threshold. Nobody wants to make the same mistake.

Because he left Likud, it's possible that Sa'ar can do something that nobody else can: peel off Likud Knesset members after the election to join and support a government under his leadership. Others in Likud are also unhappy with Netanyahu, but haven't had the nerve to split from Likud as Sa'ar did. Rather than sitting in the opposition, they could join and strengthen a Sa'ar led government, minimizing the need to rely on the left-wing parties. This could propel the leader of the party with the third or fourth largest number of votes to become prime minister.

The Pandemic

The pandemic has had many ripple effects in Israel that may impact the election: unemployment, the economy, deaths, three lockdowns, a failed government that promised to deal with these issues and more. Israel leading the world in vaccinations is a point of pride, but Israelis are asking rhetorically, "So what? Now we're vaccinated, but the country and economy are still a mess." With the borders still closed to tourists, and Israelis unable to travel and unclear about returning home to vote, the outcome of Israelis being stuck overseas and not able to come home to vote could create a problem, even ruling the election "unconstitutional."

Electoral Fatigue

As much as Israelis are tired of the impact of the pandemic, Israelis are tired of elections. It's like a costly overdose of democracy. While polls may be accurate for those planning to vote, what's unclear is how many Israelis are fed up and planning to use the day to go to the beach, skipping the vote altogether. Or, perhaps, Israelis will swarm to voting stations to try to make a change. Either of these variables can have a significant impact in the eventual outcome and will be watched closely.

As many variables that go into the election itself also exist in the eventual outcome. The votes will be counted, and the Knesset's 120 seats divided up in relative short order. However, the bottom line as to whether anyone will be able to form a government, who that will be, which parties will be included and more, are all questions to look at in the weeks and even months following March 23. Hopefully, it will be conclusive enough that Israelis will be spared another vote later this year. {eoa}

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