

Israel's Democracy: What's In Store Politically

Nobody has a clue as to what our new government coalition is going to look like. Not the TV presenters, the Internet bloggers, the newspaper pundits. In fact, not even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself. By law, he has until March 15 to make it happen.

To create a government, Netanyahu must have a coalition of at least 61 Knesset members out of 120 sign on with him. But a minimal coalition always leaves an Israeli prime minister at the mercy of any one of his coalition partners who might threaten to bail for any reason—and thus collapse the government.

Out of the 34 parties that ran in the Israeli elections, 12 parties were voted in. From these, Netanyahu can realistically choose from seven who are rightist or centrist parties. The other five parties are too far left ideologically.

Netanyahu's dream is to have a very wide coalition with 80 or so seats—so that no one party can bring his government down, or even threaten to if it doesn't get its way.

But now, here is reality. Some months ago, the Prime Minister merged his Likud party with another right-wing party, Yisrael Beytenu (Israel our Home), run by the rough-tough immigrant from Russia, Avigdor Lieberman. Together, they had expected to win 45 seats out of the 120 in the Knesset. Alas, they won only 31 which means Netanyahu has a very difficult job to build a solid and stable government.

Netanyahu's "natural partners" as he calls them, are the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) parties: Shas, which represents the Sephardic Jews—who immigrated from Muslim countries, and United Torah Judaism (UTJ)—Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated from

European and the former Soviet Union countries. Together they won 18 seats.

Why does Netanyahu value his “natural partners” so? The reason is that the Haredi parties ask for: cheap prioritized housing for their large families; money (boatloads) for their non-working population; freedom from serving in the army; and total control over all religious functions in Israel. That’s all.

With all other issues, including the Palestinian conflict, the prime minister can do whatever he wishes. Most of all, if the Haredim get their four demands met, they will never leave him or bring down his government because their benefits would disappear.

The Biggest Surprise

But Netanyahu has come face to face with a challenge that, a day before the elections, he wouldn’t have dreamed of. A brand new centrist party called Yesh Atid, (There is a Future) appeared on the horizon through the efforts of the appealing and magnetic personality of Yair Lapid. An actor, journalist, author and former TV presenter and news anchor, he is one of the most recognized faces in Israel for many years.

Expected to win five to 10 seats, he won an astounding 19, making him the second largest party in this election. Not one of his members, including himself, has ever served in the Knesset! They are mayors, a rabbi, a social activist, a former Shin Bet chief, a police commander, lawyers and journalists. (Observation: Israelis were tired of the same old faces.)

It would certainly be reasonable for Netanyahu to co-opt Lapid’s party into his new coalition. But there is an enormous obstacle. One of Lapid’s principle party pillars is that all Haredi men must serve in the army, just like everyone else.

Since this goal is a cornerstone of his party platform—even if it takes a few years to completely implement—Lapid’s

credibility would be greatly diminished before he ever got started if he compromised on this issue. And the vast majority of Israelis agree with Lapid that the ultra-Orthodox must bear an equal burden with the rest of the Israeli soldiers.

Shas and UTJ see Lapid as their mortal enemy, and have made it clear that if Lapid does not back down from this demand, it would be a red line for the Haredim, and they would not join this new government. Such a scenario would give Netanyahu Lapid's 19 members, but he would lose the 18 Haredi members.

Yet Another Surprise

But there was another surprise. A young Orthodox businessman, Naftali Bennett, put together another brand new party called Bayit Yehudi (Jewish Home). He won 12 seats. All in his party are also new faces, never before seen in the Knesset.

His amazing success was explained by veteran journalist Gil Hoffman: The new Bennett backers support Bayit Yehudi "because its leader is a charismatic, young high-tech millionaire who served in an elite Reconnaissance Unit, speaks Hebrew slang, and knows how to relate to Israelis from many different backgrounds."

(It is important not to confuse the Orthodox population with the ultra-Orthodox (Haredim), as the Orthodox (who wear a yarmulke) do serve in the army and many of them are in combat units.)

Born of American parents who immigrated to Israel, Bennett represents the settlement movement more than any other party. He is also a brilliant businessman who sold his start-up company for \$145,000,000 after only six years.

Therefore it would seem that Bennett and his party would be a perfect fit for Netanyahu, except for one thing. Bennett served as Netanyahu's bureau chief when the latter was in the opposition. To say it kindly, Bennett did not get along with either Netanyahu or his wife Sarah. He has since apologized

and is also in negotiations with Netanyahu.

The average Israeli would love to see the Netanyahu-Liberman party (31 seats) team up with Lapid (19 seats) and Bennett (12 seats), as the latter two parties have many platform goals that sorely need attention—like changing the dysfunctional system of government, improving the educational system, and making it easier for small businesses to grow.

These three parties would already give Netanyahu a majority of 62 seats. Netanyahu could then coax another eight members from small parties. That would give Netanyahu a 70-seat majority—a respectable ruling government, but not the 80-seat majority that would make Netanyahu's dreams come true.

So he may end up choosing his “natural partners” the Haredim, first of all. That would give him a total of 49 seats. Add the eight from small centrist parties, he would have 57—not enough to form a government. All of the remaining parties are strong leftist or Arab parties—none of whom would join Netanyahu's government.

Meanwhile, Yair Lapid of the centrist “There is a Future” party and Naftali Bennett of “Jewish Home” are rumored to have made a pact between them that either both go into the government or neither one will. Someone is going to have to bend.

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