

Israel's New Government Seeks Broad Consensus, Hangs by Thread

Israel finally has a new government in place, ending Benjamin Netanyahu's historic 12-year run as prime minister. But the protracted political impasse of recent years is far from over, as the extremely broad coalition may prove unworkable and is hanging on by the thinnest of margins.

Over the past 30 months, the Israeli public has stumbled through four frustrating national elections in a political deadlock that has become mystifying. The latest ballot on March 23 was closer than ever, and it took 12 weeks for the forces of "change" to finally oust Netanyahu. The new government, led for now by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, was approved in mid-June by the ultra-slim margin of 60 to 59 (with one abstention) and remains in constant peril of collapse.

The new ruling coalition is a loose collection of eight very diverse parties from the right, center, left and Arab sector who are primarily held together by their common desire to keep Netanyahu from returning as prime minister. It took four tries to pry him out of office, and even then it was by a single vote in the Knesset. The outcome was in such doubt that one lawmaker was in a serious car crash in the Galilee that morning and still rushed to Jerusalem to vote, while another parliamentarian was on a stretcher receiving medical treatments in the Knesset chamber so she could be there to vote.

Netanyahu managed an unprecedented run as prime minister because of his diplomatic and economic acumen, his mastery of Israeli politics, and above all his reputation as "Mr.

Security.” Most Israelis came to trust him to keep them safe, and for the most part he did. After facing several rocket wars with Hamas in the early 2010s, Netanyahu has overseen a relatively peaceful period for Israel, with the fewest ever number of deaths from the conflict and terror attacks in recent years. He kept the brutal Syrian civil war from spilling over into Israel even while successfully striking at Iranian and Hizbullah targets deep inside the country. He oversaw a series of clandestine operations that effectively set back Iran’s nuclear program by years. And he steered Israel past the coronavirus threat faster and more effectively than any other national leader worldwide.

But the scandals surrounding Netanyahu weakened his support on the right, and now a new generation of leaders is taking the reins of power. They are generally younger, forward-looking and concerned about the well-being of the entire nation.

The incoming coalition was forged around a rotation agreement between Bennett and Yair Lapid, who will serve as foreign minister and alternate prime minister until he takes over the top job in August 2023. Both leaders have retained veto power over major government decisions.

Head of the right-wing Yamina party, Bennett is a former commander of elite IDF units and a successful hi-tech entrepreneur. Born into a secular family, he became religiously observant and more conservative in his views, even heading the Yesha settlements council for a while. He is Israel’s first premier to regularly wear a kippa.

As leader of the centrist Yesh Atid faction, Lapid is a former TV talk show host who entered politics a decade ago to represent young, secular Israelis who resent the inordinate power and favoritism enjoyed by the ultra-Orthodox community. To his left, Merav Michaeli (Labour) and Nitzan Horowitz (Meretz) also were TV news personalities who have made use of digital and social media to build a younger following.

They are joined in the coalition by former Israel Defense Forces Gen. Benny Gantz of Blue and White, Russian strongman Avigdor Liberman of Yisrael Beiteinu, former Likudnik Gideon Sa'ar of New Hope and –the unlikelyst of partners–Mansour Abbas of the Arab-Islamist faction Ra'am.

The common denominator between them is a sense that Netanyahu based so many important decisions in recent years not on national interests, but on simply staying in power to gain an advantage—and even immunity—in his ongoing corruption trials. He also has sided with the ultra-Orthodox on many issues, such as reneging on the Western Wall prayer compromise, thereby alienating many Israelis as well as much of Diaspora Jewry.

Bennett will focus on getting back to good governance, passing a proper state budget, making decisions by consensus, dealing with societal tensions and taking all sectors of the populace into consideration.

Meanwhile, Lapid will handle foreign policy. Few expect much movement toward a “two-state solution” with the Palestinians, as it could unravel the fragile coalition. Rather, Lapid's main efforts will be on building ties with the Biden administration and European Union, and repairing the breach with the progressive left, beginning with American Jewish leaders. The Bennett-Lapid government also will try to continue the momentum of the Abraham Accords towards normalization with the Arab world.

No doubt those regional accords influenced Ra'am to become the first Arab party to sit as full-fledged members of an Israeli Cabinet. Netanyahu legitimized such a move by first reaching out to Mansour Abbas ahead of the last election, but he eventually chose to go with the “change” movement, putting the Bennett-Lapid alignment over the top by one seat. Abbas appears to be taking a genuinely pragmatic and conciliatory approach towards the Jewish majority in Israel, even visiting a synagogue in Lod burned by Arab rioters during the recent

Gaza conflict and pledging to rebuild it.

This has now put Netanyahu and the Likud in the unfamiliar position of sitting in the opposition, and they are vowing to bring down the Bennett-Lapid coalition as soon as possible. The Knesset plenum meets to vote every Monday thru Wednesday, and no doubt Likud will be filing weekly no-confidence motions against the government. This means lawmakers on both sides will not be traveling abroad much over coming months, as the thinnest of margins separates Israel from yet another election. {eoa}

David Parsons *is an author, attorney, journalist and ordained minister who serves as vice president and senior spokesman for the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, .*

Follow breaking news like this and more in our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.