

Will Israel Be Doomed Politically Without Dramatic Change?

Among the well-known themes in modern U.S. Presidential campaigns, many remember a guiding principle and mantra of Bill Clinton's 1992 successful campaign defeating then incumbent President George Bush Sr., "It's the economy, stupid."

The message was clear that the economy was a pillar of the campaign and not to get distracted by tangential issues.

As Israel's fourth election in two years approaches, the campaigns to unseat long time incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would be well advised to stick to a few clear pillars of messaging as well. This year, one inevitable theme is the impact of and government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the adaptation of Clinton's mantra to "It's the coalition, stupid."

Why?

What's become apparent in the failure of Netanyahu to build or maintain a stable coalition over the past few years for a variety of reasons, is that without dramatic change, Israel will be doomed to more of the same, both in terms of elections as well as government stagnation.

When polls are taken in Israel, people don't just look at simple winners and losers, but calculate the possible realistic configurations of forming a new government. To form a government, one needs at least 61 seats of the 120 member Knesset (parliament). It's assumed today that with Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud party in the lead and poised to receive as many as 30 seats—even with their natural coalition

partners including Yamina (Naftali Bennet's party), and the two Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) parties—they still won't have enough to put together at least a 61-seat government.

At the same time, while Naftali Bennett does not rule out joining a coalition and sitting in a government with Netanyahu as prime minister, he's also challenging Netanyahu and Likud from the right. However, there's really no practical reason to think that Bennett's Yamina party can receive enough votes to win, much less lead a coalition.

He's also hedging his bets, as it's typically understood that Bennett's Yamina could just as easily join a coalition of other right of center, center and even left-wing parties to unseat Netanyahu. While Bennett is generally well regarded, this creates a level of uncertainty in that voting for Yamina, one could get any number of results, including those that many of Bennett's largely right-of-center supporters would likely not support.

Leading the challenge to Netanyahu from the right however, which is what all polls show most voters being inclined to do, is former Netanyahu advisor and government minister, Gidon Sa'ar. Sa'ar quit the Knesset and the Likud party of which he's been a long-time member late last year, to establish a new party called New Hope.

Like Bennett, Sa'ar and New Hope have solid right-wing credentials. Sa'ar is also well regarded. He's attracting people to join the party who also have solid credentials, and who in many cases, also left Likud, demonstrating that they are not anyone's puppet. That integrity is refreshing.

Long believing it's time for a change, Sa'ar has challenged Netanyahu for leadership within the Likud party, and now with a new party that could win enough votes that he might be able to form a coalition and become Israel's next prime minister. Unlike Bennett, Sa'ar rules out forming a coalition with

Likud, under Netanyahu's continued leadership.

Polls today show Sa'ar's New Hope receiving 14-17 seats which, while only about half of that which Likud might receive, could still put him in the commanding position to form the next government. In Israel, following elections, the president receives representatives from each of the parties that won enough votes to serve in the Knesset, at least %. The president hears who each party recommends for prime minister, and designates the head of the party that has the greatest probability to form a government, not necessarily who received most votes, to do so.

In addition to New Hope, there are a handful of parties all polling between several and just under 20 seats that could come together and recommend Sa'ar, giving him first chance to form a coalition. In addition, Sa'ar consistently comes in second among polls when asking people who is the most suitable to be prime minister. Complementing this, it's possible that break away members of the Israeli Arab "Joint List" could throw their support behind Sa'ar, even if not sitting in the government, but using that as an opportunity to win concessions for the Israeli Arab public.

Following the vote, it's not impossible that a number of Likud members elected to Knesset could break away, formally or informally creating their own faction, and throwing their support behind Sa'ar. This would not happen with the other possible contender, Yair Lapid, a former TV news host and head of the Yesh Atid party that's considered to be center left. Yesh Atid is one of the parties that is also polling in the upper teens, but when asked who is most suitable to be prime minister, Lapid only receives a low single digit in the polls.

Israelis know this. The question going into the election is whether they feel a need for change and will vote accordingly, or if they will (continue to) vote according to ideological lines which will in all likelihood lead to more stagnation.

A chief consideration in deciding who to vote for is to empower a party and its leader with enough votes to win, if not the most votes at least enough to get the presidential nod to form a coalition.

Israelis must consider with whom each party is likely to make a coalition, and what the outcome of that will be. Possibly more than ever, Israelis are tired of the “natural” coalition of Likud and the ultra-Orthodox parties, and the concessions that are made accordingly.

The big question is whether Israelis will shift their voting enough to give one clear mandate to a party and its candidate, like Sa’ar, to replace Netanyahu and change the status quo.
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