



Elections in Israel

Is Change Possible?

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- As Israel approaches its general elections on March 17, 2015, the biggest question is what type of government will be formed.
- The Israeli political system has produced a divided electorate with a variety of medium-sized parties.
- For the first time in years, there is a chance for a centrist-left coalition to lead.

On March 17, 2015, Israeli citizens will exercise their democratic right and vote for their preferred list of candidates for the nation's parliament, the Knesset, from which the government is formed. Since the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, there have been 19 such elections; while the term of each Knesset is legally four years, over the past few decades no term has lasted its full length, and early elections were called for a variety of reasons.

This election—the 20th in the history of the state—caught many by surprise, because few expected that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would allow the Knesset to dissolve less than two years after it was formed, let alone be the initiator of this process. Yet a combination of legislative acts that were promoted despite Netanyahu's dissent, coalition partners' internal opposition, and Israelis' growing dissatisfaction with their perceived personal security and financial status led the Prime Minister to call for a quick new election, with the hope of reinforcing his political base. Netanyahu is known for his highly developed survival skills, and the popular perception among Israelis has been that he would never willingly shorten his term unless he was sure that a new election would strengthen his power. This did not happen. In fact, in the past few weeks, his Likud party has seemed to weaken in the polls, and the Israeli center-left has a real chance to regain power and form the next coalition government for the first time in years.

Characteristics of the Israeli Election and Party System

Any discussion of Israeli politics requires first an understanding of Israel's unique election system. Unlike Germany, Israel only has two levels of government: local authorities (cities or regional councils) and the national level. These levels are not intertwined in a federal system, and the Knesset is the only national chamber forming the Israeli legislature. It is comprised of 120 members, who are elected on a representational basis from national lists. When an election is called, the national political parties present lists of candidates, and Israeli voters select one closed and static list that they support. The 120 seats in the Knesset are allocated to the parties based on the proportion of support they received from the overall vote—from the number one person on the list to the others. Once the results are in, the president

of the state—who has very few executive powers and serves mainly a ceremonial role—summons the heads of all the political parties and consults with them about whom they want for a coalition and to serve as the next prime minister. The president then appoints the head of the party he believes has the highest chances of forming a stable and long-lasting coalition. Historically, this responsibility has always been delegated to the head of the largest party; but the law allows the president to exercise discretion and select another candidate if he believes that he or she has a higher chance of forming a coalition—a scenario that indeed happened in 2009, when Netanyahu was asked by then-President Shimon Peres to form a government, even though the Likud party he headed won a seat less than the centrist Kadima party.

The Israeli election system creates a proliferation of political parties—and a proliferation of potential coalitions. The election threshold to enter the Knesset is 3.25 per cent of the votes corresponding to four seats; a system that is meant to allow political representation of the many segments of Israeli society, but in reality produces parliaments of up to 15 to 20 parties of various sizes. Up until the 1970s, there were traditionally two political blocks—the right and the left—each comprised of one major party and several small satellite parties. In this case, the outcome of an election tended to be clear: the head of the largest party easily reached a coalition agreement with the smaller satellite parties in its political block, and a government was formed. Yet over the past few decades voting patterns have changed, and in the upcoming election the anticipation is that instead of two major, relatively predictable blocks as in the past, the Israeli electorate will produce a Knesset with five to eleven parties. Besides Likud and the Zionist Union, which each might get about 20 to 27 seats in parliament, there are three medium-sized parties that may each receive 10 to 15 of the mandates, and about six smaller parties with the chance of entering the Knesset. This situation will allow a multitude of potential coalitions, and the role of the President, as described earlier, will be much more central: the President will in fact have a major impact on deciding who might form the governing coalition and become prime minister.

Another complexity inherent in the Israeli system is the unique distinction between »right« and »left«. In Israel, each one of these terms has a double meaning—an

economic one, like in Germany, but also a geo-strategic one involving regional policies. The Israeli right tends to be capitalist in economic policies, but also hard line in its approach towards the prospects of achieving peace with the Arab neighbors. Right-wing parties oppose the ceding of land to the Palestinians as a means of ending the conflict. The Israeli left, on the other hand, is both social democratic in its economic policies, and dovish in its approach towards solving the territorial and national dispute with the Palestinians. However, the current election features not only classic »right« and »left« voting patterns, but also political hybrids that combine the economic left with the political right, and vice versa. Add to that another unique Israeli phenomenon, ultra-Orthodox and Arab parties, and a very animated, emotional, and confusing political spectrum emerges. This spectrum can be divided between clear right-wing and left-wing agendas, with several parties being potential partners in any coalition—regardless of its political inclination.

The Main Players at a Glance: The Likud of Prime Minister Netanyahu

The Likud Party, which is Israel's most established and popular moderate right-wing party, is led by Prime Minister Netanyahu. While still the largest party in the right-wing block, the Likud is losing seats in all of the polls. As of the last week of February, the party's predicted outcome is around 20 to 23 seats, and the negative momentum might continue to drive its electorate even further to other alternatives. The Likud's main problem seems to be the sense among Israelis that the party has been in power for too long; Netanyahu himself has been prime minister for the past six years, and various right-wing governments have been in power for most of the past 35 years. Netanyahu's current term, which is ending less than two years after the previous election, can be characterized as an overall standstill. Israelis feel that the prime minister is more interested in his own political survival than leading the country to a better future, and thus takes no risks to advance bold policies, ideas, or initiatives. In most fronts that are important to Israelis—the peace process with the Palestinians, economic reform, social improvement—there is a feeling that little has changed since the last election, and that Netanyahu's term has passed without a single significant and long-lasting achievement. Stories about Netanyahu's personal behavior—including alleged excessive usage

of public resources for his own benefit and misconduct with both his political and personal staff—feed a growing anti-Netanyahu sentiment among large parts of the Israeli public. In addition, the Likud Party has become a version of the Tea Party movement in the United States (US). While Likud voters tend to be moderate, the Likud's politicians have become increasingly extreme in their policies, in an attempt to please the settlers and hard-liners who make up a large portion of the Likud membership. These reasons lead many to believe that for the first time in almost two decades, Israel's largest center-right party might lose its position as the largest party in parliament, thus allowing for an alternative center-left government.

Netanyahu's most important political decision was to try to steer the elections towards the issue where he is perceived to have an advantage—his handling of security issues. For this reason, a large part of his campaign focused on his struggle to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear power. This campaign reached a peak in his controversial trip to the US, where he addressed the US Congress on March 3, 2015. In his speech, he warned about a possible agreement with Iran that would ease the sanctions on Iran, while still allowing the country to hold on to its nuclear capacity. This speech was seen in the US as a blunt intervention in US politics, and thus harmful to the unique relationship the US and Israel maintain. While Netanyahu claims that his supreme agenda is stopping a nuclear Iran at all costs, his opponents see the speech as a dangerous attempt to gain votes at the expense of harming the friendship between Israel and its greatest ally.

The Left: The »Zionist Union« Promoting an Alternative

On the other side of the political spectrum, the main momentum is enjoyed by the »Zionist Union« alliance—which is a combination of Israel's main social-democratic party, Labor (»Avoda«) led by the head of the opposition Isaac Herzog, and the party that was founded by Tzipi Livni last election, Hatnua, whose main platform was the promotion of the peace process. Current polls give the Zionist Camp 24 seats or more, making it currently the number one party and thus a natural candidate to form the next coalition. The Zionist Union's rise in the polls is nothing less than political alchemy. Several months ago, Labor's appeal equaled about 13 seats in the polls, while

Tzipi Livni's Hatnua was on the verge of disappearing altogether due to lack of popular support. Yet the combination of the two produced a leading contender to take over the Israeli political system. The list of this new alliance, elected mainly by a primary election of Labor members, is considered young and fresh, and represents the Israeli social protest movement that emerged in the summer of 2011. The movement called for social justice, social equality, a struggle against government corruption, more government transparency, a change of the national budget allocation system to channel money from the Jewish Settlements in the Occupied Territories to poor communities within the 1967 borders, and other social causes. It is also the most feminine list of Israeli politics, with an unprecedented total (in Israeli terms) of nine women in its first 25 slots. Herzog and Livni are running as a couple under the slogan »A Responsible Leadership for Israel,« making a clear statement that the only way to avoid a fourth term headed by Netanyahu is by voting for the Zionist Union. In the meanwhile, their messaging is succeeding.

Also on the left wing is the social democratic party Meretz, which is Israel's champion of human and civil rights. Meretz is approaching this election in a rather inferior position. Having been in the opposition for 20 years, the party's last successes in terms of executive decisions were from the period from 1992 to 1995, when it was a partner in Yitzhak Rabin's government. That, and the fact that the Zionist Union's list features many political figures who are associated with civil and human rights, Meretz's performance in polls is currently between four and six seats. If the party fails to mobilize its voters on election day, it risks gaining less than four seats—meaning it will disappear completely and not be represented in the upcoming Knesset.

The Decisive Factor: Small and Medium-Sized Parties

Apart from the two large parties, there are several other major contenders that should be noticed. First and foremost, Bayit Yehudi (Jewish Home)—a modern version of a historic, moderate religious party—continues to rise in polls making it the third most important political force with a clear inclination towards the radical right. Led by the extremely popular and charismatic Naftali Bennet, a former high-tech millionaire who served as

Netanyahu's chief of staff and is the current Minister of Economy, Bayit Yehudi is on a quick track to becoming the most important right-wing party in the next Israeli election. Bennet's campaign relies heavily on online content, social media, viral videos, and appeal to young voters. While he and most of his list are religious, Bennet's electorate also includes the secular right-wing, and his campaign is based on patriotism and Jewish pride. Bennet rejects the idea of a two-state solution and advocates Israel's continued military and civilian presence in the Palestinian Territories. With such an ideology, Bennet has already made it clear that he would only join a Netanyahu-led coalition, yet he seeks to be the person who will himself head the government in the following election. The Bayit Yehudi party currently enjoys around 15 seats in the polls, and is the only contender that has shown constant growth in each and every poll since the beginning of the campaign.

A second partner who is most likely to be a partner in a right-wing government is the Israel Beiteinu (Israel our Home), a party led by the right-wing politician Avigdor Lieberman. Another former close ally of Netanyahu and the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lieberman has had a dramatic political career. An immigrant from the former Soviet Union who was brought up in a working-class household, he rose to be one of the most influential politicians in Israel. The Israel Beiteinu platform was based on representing the interests of one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union, together with aggressive anti-Arab rhetoric and right-wing patriotism. However, as the »Russian« immigrant community became increasingly absorbed in Israeli society, the need for such a party diminished. An immense political and financial corruption scandal—in which many senior members of the party were involved—was made public several weeks ago, thus harming the Israel Beiteinu party drastically. Currently the party receives around six to seven seats in the polls—less than half the number during its glory days.

Another party struggling to regain its relevance is Yesh Atid (There is a future), a centrist party that emerged during the last election, promised to improve the economic situation of the Israeli middle class, and received a whopping 19 seats. The party's leader, Finance Minister Yair Lapid, is a mega-celebrity who rose to fame as a television journalist. Yesh Atid's main promise, to lower the cost of living, did not materialize. Lapid's campaign

strategy now focuses on government corruption and on his own ability to attract hundreds of people every night to political assemblies in various parts of Israel. Lapid's main competition is Kulanu (All of us), another centrist party that focuses on the same middle-class electorate. Led by charismatic Moshe Kahlon, a former Likud member, the party promises to lower the cost of living in the same way that Kahlon managed to lower the prices of cell phone charges when he was Minister of Communications. Lapid's current poll outcome is about ten seats, and Kahlon's is about eight. Despite both leaders' harsh criticism of Netanyahu, they will most likely partner with whomever forms the next coalition—Netanyahu or Herzog—as the main purpose of both parties is to influence within the establishment.

To complete the puzzle of Israeli politics, one must mention the three ultra-Orthodox parties, which despite internal disputes, will probably maintain their power as a 15-seat block that leans to the right, but can join any coalition; as well as a unified Arab list that for the first time in Israeli history brings together the many political forces of the Arab minority in Israel—from the communists to a party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Recent legislation that raised the threshold of entry into the Knesset from 2.5 to 3.25 per cent forced the various Arab parties to unite, and the newly formed party is predicted to receive up to 15 seats in the Knesset.

Coalition Prospects in Times of Political Uncertainty

With so much variety, and so many players who do not belong exclusively to one political block, the potential coalitions are numerous. One possible coalition is what Israelis call a »National Unity Government,« in which the two major parties—Likud on the right and the Zionist Union on the left—form a coalition in which the position of prime minister rotates between the leaders of both parties. This option is probable, because although it seems possible that the Zionist Union will be the largest party in the next Knesset, the overall center-left does not yet clearly have the solid 61-seat block needed to form a government. The Zionist Union's main goal is to gain voters who are inclined to vote for the centrist parties, under the explicit threat that the only way for the Israeli public to ensure that Netanyahu will not be prime minister after the upcoming election is by voting for the

Herzog-Livni list. Other possible coalitions are a center-right coalition led by Netanyahu, featuring the Bayit Yehudi, the ultra-Orthodox parties, and the two major centrist lists led by Lapid and Kahlon. The latter two partners could also be senior members in a centrist-left coalition led by Herzog, which would also include the ultra-Orthodox parties and would gain support from the United Arab Party, which has made it clear that while it does not want ministerial posts, it will nonetheless support a left-wing government. Currently, of all options, a national unity government seems most probable, followed by a centrist-right coalition.

One thing is clear: the current Israeli political system is quickly headed towards gridlock. From a system that favored two large parties and several small parties—and was designed to represent the unique Israeli human mosaic—it has become a system of around five medium-sized parties of various strengths, which makes the formation and maintenance of coalitions a difficult task. Israelis are hopeful that in the near future this issue will be addressed by the very same politicians that currently benefit from the system. Is this it a realistic hope? Probably not. But then again, everything is possible in Israeli politics.



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