

After Two Israeli Elections: Unity Government or A Third Election on the Horizon?

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Abstract: On September 17, Israel went to the polls again after the failure of coalition talks in the aftermath of the April 9 elections. Even though several changes took place in public support for certain political parties, results of the second election did not bring about any radical change from what occurred with the first one. Amidst Benjamin Netanyahu's trial process, the room for manoeuvre for Israeli politicians is getting narrowed. If political actors do not use this narrow pathway to exit from political deadlock, a third elections possibly without Netanyahu is very likely.

Introduction

For the first time in the State of Israel's history, the country had to run a second election following the failure to form a coalition after the elections in April. Both elections and the interim period between the two, are significant in shaping the future of Arab-Israeli rapprochement as well as the implementation of the "Deal of the Century", which has garnered vague reactions from political parties in Israel with the exception of criticism from the far-right political figures.¹

However, as the post-elections atmosphere has revealed there is yet to be any explanation of the issues nor any anticipated explanations to come in the near future. Results of the September 17 elections are mainly the same as the previous one in April and even though the unity government between the two biggest parties seems to be the most likely option, the possibility of going into a third election is still on the table. This paper will discuss the outcomes of the second election in September which demonstrated four significant facts in Israeli politics, which are also closely related to the Palestinian issue.

First, the right-wing Likud party which has been dominating the Israeli political sphere for almost a decade under Benjamin

Netanyahu's leadership, is at a crossroads. Second, even though the party increased its votes in the interim period, the multi-faceted structure of the Kachol Lavan (Blue and White) party and the lack of efficient partners from the center-left with which to form a coalition, puts the party's future into question. Third, following the gradual influence of the religious right, secular voices appear to be united and increasingly raising their volume under the leadership of Avigdor Lieberman, chairman of the Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) Party. Fourth, the increasing involvement of Arab citizens of Israel in the political system can remain as an unrequited initiative.

Outcome of the September Elections and Coalition Scenarios

Regarding what has changed since the elections in April, several points are noteworthy to indicate. The biggest change is that the Likud lost enough votes to end up falling into the second place ranking. Despite the fact that the party merged with the Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu party with 4 seats in the April elections, both the number of votes and the seats it received dramatically decreased. Second, although the party lost two seats in the Knesset in the interim period, the Blue and White increased its popularity with an increase of 25,000 votes and headed at the top of the rivalry. Third,

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the Yisrael Beiteinu Party which played a key position in coalition-forming efforts with 5 seats in the previous elections this year, further improved its position and became even more crucial in shaping the upcoming developments in Israeli politics. Fourth, the Arab parties that entered the previous elections as two separate factions, became more efficient by entering the last elections as a unit this time around, effectively increasing their seats. Lastly, the unification strategy of the far-right parties under Yemina, led by Ayelet Shaked has seemingly paid off resulting in a 2 seat increase. However, the same strategy as employed by the left-wing party with former PM Ehud Barak, did not bear the same result.

Results of Two Israeli Elections in 2019

September 17 Elections

Name of list	Number of valid votes	% of total votes	Number of seats
Blue and White	1,151,214	25.95	33
Likud	1,113,617	25.10	32
Joint List (Hadash, Ra'am, Ta'al, Balad)	470,211	10.60	13
Shas	330,199	7.44	9
Yisrael Beiteinu	310,154	6.99	8
United Torah Judaism	268,775	6.06	7
Yemina	260,655	5.87	7
Labor-Gesher	212,782	4.80	6
Democratic Union	192,495	4.34	5

April 9 Elections

Name of list	Number of valid votes	% of total votes	Number of seats
Likud	1,140,370	26.46	35
Blue and White	1,125,881	26.13	35
Shas	258,275	5.99	8
United Torah Judaism	249,049	5.78	8
Hadash-Ta'al	193,442	4.49	6
Israeli Labor Party	190,870	4.43	6
Yisrael Beiteinu	173,004	4.01	5
United Right	159,468	3.70	5
Meretz	156,473	3.63	4
Kulanu	152,756	3.54	4
Ra'am-Balad	143,666	3.33	4

Source: Official Website of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament).

Following the announcement of official results, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin authorized Netanyahu to assemble a coalition government, since he was recommended as the Prime Minister by more parliamentarians than the victorious Blue and White party. However, with his returning the mandate to Rivlin on October 21, the Israeli President intends to authorize Gantz to form a coalition government. If he also fails in this attempt, a third election will take place around February. The different possible scenarios for a coalition government can be listed as follows:

A Unity Government between Likud and Blue & White

This option might seem the most likely way out of electoral deadlock in the country. Although two parties failed in negotiations before Netanyahu's being authorized by the president for forming the government, it is reported that President Rivlin also favoured this option as "two simultaneous prime ministers", in which he proposed to both leaders a unity government in which an "interim prime minister" would enjoy all prime ministerial authority in the event that the prime minister was forced to take a leave of absence.² Although Gantz first refused this proposal³ in accordance with his rejection to partake in a coalition with a prime minister under indictment⁴, he carried his willingness to negotiate with the condition of being the prime minister and not vice prime minister while Netanyahu is suspended from the premiership with an indictment.⁵

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Having said that, Gantz will have to face two challenges should he accept to form a coalition with the Likud. First, the Blue and White party is based on three central-left small parties (Gantz-led Hosen L'Yisrael [The Israel Resilience], Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid [There is Future] and Moshe Yaalon's Telem party). If he accepts to become PM either first or second in a rotation agreement, there is no guarantee that the Blue and White party will not collapse. Second, even if the disagreements were ignored for a period and the coalition is formed, the life span of such government will be expectedly short due to serious disagreements over the political agenda of the country, particularly on security issues. Indeed, it is a striking fact that three former top-generals who served under Netanyahu's government, united under a single political unit in order to oppose their former superior.

This deadlock brings another alternative in a unity government option. Prior to the second election, it was reported that Gantz would not object to forming a coalition with the Likud without Netanyahu and doing a rotation agreement with another leader in Likud.⁶ For this reason, Gantz may intend for Netanyahu to be removed from the Likud's leadership (either by indictment or through the election of a new leader within the party). In fact, Netanyahu's failure to form a coalition government twice in a year, further threatened his leadership position within the party. Yet, a Likud party without Netanyahu will not be able to hold its electorate power stable, which will also endanger the stability of a coalition government.

Lieberman-backed Governments

One might consider that Lieberman-led Yisrael Beiteinu is currently the most advantageous party since it could preserve the privilege of "king-maker" position with an increasing amount of votes in the six month period. In the coalition talks, Lieberman has a chance to be both in a Blue and White-led central-left wing coalition or Likud-led right-wing coalition with its strategic 8 seats in the Knesset. The party's pro-secular agenda that accompanies a nationalist rhetoric, enables the party to be a potential partner for both sides. However, this does not necessarily mean that it will join any coalition-forming efforts as Lieberman has yet to recommend any candidate for the PM position so far.

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In order to include Yisrael Beiteinu into a coalition, there are two interconnected challenges that need to be resolved by the coalition-forming parties. First, Lieberman's growing popularity as the voice of secular voters can manifest itself in the growing political demands of him, including a rotation in the Prime Ministerial office.⁷ These demands bring us to the second challenge, which was ultimately the reason for failure in Netanyahu's forming a coalition after the previous elections in April. Lieberman refuses to join a coalition with ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties and instead, has a political agenda to undermine the ultra-Orthodox Jews' dominance in everyday life and exemption from military service. Namely, an involvement of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties in any kind of coalition would cause it to lose Lieberman's support.

When it comes to a Blue and White-led coalition, this possibility is less likely. Although secular values might be helpful to forge a coalition for both sides, as well as several other leftist parties, there is still a need for the support of the Joint List in order to reach 61 seats. However, Lieberman stated in advance that he will not sit with the Arabs in a coalition, since the ultra-Orthodox parties are political opponents but the Joint List is certainly "an enemy" for him.⁸ It would be nonsense to expect Lieberman's

support for such a coalition attempt, even though the Joint List just recommended Gantz as a candidate for the PM position without any demand for taking part in coalition.

What Lieberman wants is clear: A unity government with his additional support.⁹ He does not want to limit his political capital by simply relying on a left or right-wing government, and favours an option in which he can expand his audience and voter-base through a key position in forming the unity government. Because even if the two parties can reach the minimum number of seats with their coalition (65), the slight difference of four seats puts the future of the coalition into danger. Hence, he took the initiative on this issue by suggesting Gantz accept Rivlin's offer.¹⁰ Yet, as it was discussed previously, the unity government option with him is mostly dependent on the dynamics that are beyond Lieberman. All in all, this political deadlock, brings us to the conclusion that the possibility of witnessing a third election in Israel is not so far-fetched.

Future Prospects for Political Parties in Israel Likud

As the biggest loser of the last elections, the upcoming process will be challenging for the Likud party, regardless of the result that will come out of Netanyahu's indictment process.

Moreover, the “different league” image that he has built based on his close relationship with Trump and Putin at the same time, was also tarnished after Trump appeared to distance himself from Netanyahu by stressing that the American relationship is “with Israel” meanwhile Putin made him wait for three hours for a meeting in Sochi

Along with losing seats, the party also reached its limits of sustaining a group of coalitions within its own structure that includes secular and religious, central and far-right figures at the same time. After their dominance in the Israeli political landscape for the last decade, it is inevitable for the party to see some fractures within itself. This situation is predictably linked with Netanyahu himself. His being under indictment over several allegations¹¹ and his wife Sara and his son Yair’s scandalous involvement¹² in political issues¹³, has already pushed the limits in both party circles and public opinion.

Moreover, the “different league” image that he has built based on his close relationship with Trump and Putin at the same time, was also tarnished after Trump appeared¹⁴ to distance himself from Netanyahu by stressing that the American relationship is “with Israel” meanwhile Putin made him wait for three hours for a meeting in Sochi.¹⁵ Hence, he has already begun to be seen as the biggest reason for a likely third election in the country. According to a poll surveyed by Channel 12¹⁶, 33% of those who polled said it would be Netanyahu’s fault if they have to run for elections again, while 52% (including 33% of Likud voters) believe that he should step down and let another Likud member form the next government.

In fact, the party has recently stated¹⁷ that Netanyahu is considering calling a snap primaries for dispelling “the illusion of rebellion” within the Likud. Gideon Saar, who is the main rival of Netanyahu¹⁸, quickly said that he is ready in a Twitter post.¹⁹ According to a poll surveyed for the favoured Likud leadership successor, Saar leads with 31% of support ahead of the Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein (11%) Foreign Minister Israel Katz (5%) and Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan (5%).²⁰ These facts demonstrate that the dominance of the Likud party is about to end in the short-term regardless of the results of Netanyahu’s trial process. His failure to form a government twice in a year can also accelerate the intra-party rivalry.

So far, the most distinguishing aspect of the Blue and White was the “anti-Netanyahu” stance and it owes much of its electoral achievement in such a short term to this factor. However, the party still lacks a clear agenda regarding the Palestinian issue, minorities in Israel and economic affairs

Blue and White

Although the party has gained significant achievements in such a short-time period in the two elections, the Blue and White party still faces several challenges that might determine the life-span of the alliance within it. For instance, the multiplicity of leading figures might create problems in future. Among them, three were ex-top generals of the Israeli army (Gantz, Ashkenazi, Yaalon) and frictions might take place in the decision-making process. Moreover, Lapid as a former media figure, has joined the alliance with growing popularity and his increasing demands might lead to problems with top figures in the Blue and White party.

Yet, the real significant challenge is actually related to the identity of the party. So far, the most distinguishing aspect of the Blue and White was the “anti-Netanyahu” stance and it owes much of its electoral achievement in such a short term to this factor. However, the party still lacks a clear agenda regarding the Palestinian issue, minorities in Israel and economic affairs. Although it rhetorically emphasized issues such as global collaboration on security, the recognition of Arab Israelis as equal citizens and requiring religious Jews to serve in the army in its party program,²¹ where the party differs from Netanyahu’s Likud is still ambiguous. Unless a unity government is formed, which would also be costly for the party, such vague terms shaping

the party identity might blockade the party’s rise in a political future without Netanyahu.

Yisrael Beiteinu

As the biggest winner of the second election, Yisrael Beiteinu’s strategy will be based on consolidating its presence among the secular voters in Israeli society.²² The most salient point regarding the Yisrael Beiteinu’s strategy is that the party gradually shifted from becoming a “Russian-Israeli” party which enjoys electorate support from the Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union countries to embracing the representation of voters with secular values across all sections of Israeli society. In the upcoming period, the party can be expected to maintain this strategy, considering the growing influence of religious Jews in Israeli politics.

Furthermore, Lieberman’s efforts to expand his political influence are closely related with the future of Likud and Netanyahu. In the event of Netanyahu’s dismissal and the Likud’s having a serious cleavage under a new leadership, some of the secular and ultra-nationalist members who would not be content with the religious Jews’ influence over the party might join Lieberman’s party in the medium term. A likely third election, however, would not offer the same increase in votes as in the case of the September elections since he would not be able to hold his promise of forming a unity government.

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The Joint List

One of the winners in the September elections was the Joint List of the 4 Arab parties. When four parties entered separately under two groups in the April elections, they could have gained 10 seats. However, the harshening anti-Arab rhetoric of Netanyahu for the second elections revealed the need for the unity of the 4 parties and it worked in terms of increasing the turnout of Arab citizens of Israel.²³ With their recommending Gantz to form the next government, just as Itzhak Rabin received the same approval 25 years earlier, the Arab citizens of Israel seemed to open up a new era in Israeli politics by transforming into an active political power than exerting a limited influence. Nevertheless, it seemed as though this political move did not face enough repercussions in Israeli politics, let alone the reaction was garnered by the Lieberman’s Yisrael Beiteinu party. Moreover, friction within the List appeared when the Balad party refused to recommend Gantz as the party shot itself in the foot. These developments, in the event of running for a third election, may result in the Arab parties entering as two separate lists like in April and therefore the turnout in the Arab Israeli electorate is likely to fall.

Conclusion

Given these factors, it can be said that a new era in Israel politics is likely to start either with or without Netanyahu and the years under the Likud as a dominant party are likely about to end. These results in the elections demonstrated that successful electoral strategies based on benefiting from the demarcation of social cleavages might backlash in the long-term. Starting with the 2015 elections, the Netanyahu-led Likud championed this strategy by targeting the Israeli Arabs and leaning on religious Zionist and pro-settler movement voters. However, this strategy brought about a party that is overstretched in the social spectrum which failed to relate to the voters in the centre as well as the secular people.

This chaos in Israeli politics will also put the future of the controversial “Deal of the Century” solution under question. The Arab-Israeli rapprochement that is mostly based on a conjectural and tactical basis rather than a contextual and strategic one. These projects are largely initiatives based on personal relations between Trump, Netanyahu, Mohammad bin Salman and Mohammad bin Zayed. As long as Israel is unable to come with an actor to represent their interests for negotiations on a solution of the Palestinian issue, the problems of the Palestinians will continue to grow and settle more deeply.

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