

Israel ahead of its fourth early elections

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On 23 March, Israel will hold its fourth early parliamentary elections in two years (the previous ones took place on 9 April 2019, 17 September 2019 and 2 March 2020). Polls show that 11-12 groups may join the 120-person Knesset (there are currently eight). The ruling Likud party, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is leading the polls, and is predicted to win just under 30 seats. After them come the centrist Yesh Atid party led by Yair Lapid (18 seats), the right-wing New Hope under Gideon Sa'ar (splitters from Likud, 13 seats), the national-religious Right Party led by Naphtali Bennett (11), the Arab Joint List (9), the ultra-Orthodox (Sephardic) Shas party (8), the right-wing Our Home Israel, mainly supported by the Russian-speaking population (7), the ultra-Orthodox (Ashkenazi) United Torah Judaism (7), the left-wing Labour Party (6), the extreme-right Religious Zionism (4) and the left-wing Meretz (4). The Blue-White party, which is presently in the ruling coalition with Likud, is teetering on the border of the electoral threshold.

Commentary

- The sources of the political crisis in Israel are twofold – personal-political and systemic. Its immediate cause is the slow but consistent erosion of the position, authority and potential for coalition of Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has dominated the domestic political scene for over a decade. Despite his undisputed services to the state (especially in the field of foreign and security policy), his continued rule is becoming increasingly unacceptable to a growing part of the electorate and the country's political forces. The main causes of this situation are his polarising style of politics, which escalate divisions and social conflicts, and his problems with the law (he is the subject of an ongoing criminal trial for corruption and abuses of office). Mainstream voters have also been discouraged from voting for Likud by Netanyahu's growing dependence on extreme political forces, primarily the religious parties and the messianic, religious-national right. The weakening of his position has brought about a situation where he has been unable to build a stable government coalition for over two years, and he has governed the country as head of a temporary cabinet for most of that time. However, his position has so far been strong enough to prevent any attempts to remove him from power. On the other hand, the systemic causes of the crisis include the fragmentation and polarisation of the political scene, which reflect the growing ideological rifts within Israeli society.
- As expected, the 'grand coalition' (including Likud and the Blue-White party) formed after the previous elections in March 2020 only brought about a temporary suspension of the crisis, not its solution. From the very beginning, the cabinet's activities were marked by conflicts and mutual distrust between the coalition partners. For the Blue-Whites, who

went into the previous elections under the slogan of removing Netanyahu from power, entering into an alliance with Likud and staying in it resulted in the collapse of the group and its political bankruptcy (currently support for the party is hovering around the electoral threshold).

- Although there has been a significant reshuffle on the domestic party scene since the previous elections (including the disintegration of the Blue-Whites and the split within Likud), the situation in the Knesset after the election on 23 March will probably resemble that of the last three rounds of elections. The dividing line will run between Likud and the religious parties it allies with, and a whole galaxy of opposition groups from left and right whose aim is to remove Netanyahu from power. According to the polls, none of these blocs can currently count on winning a clear majority. In purely mathematical terms, the opposition has a good chance of winning at least 61 seats, but the coalition it formed would have to consist of at least 5-6 groups, all of which have very different world views (from the hard right to the liberal left), and its formation would have to meet the ambitions of at least three leaders (Lapid, Sa'ar and Bennett), each of whom wants to become the head of government. Such a scenario therefore seems unlikely. If it did happen, though, it would undoubtedly constitute a breakthrough in Israeli politics: it would mean the end of the Netanyahu era (probably for good, in view of his problems with the law) and would open the way to completely new political and personal configurations. At the same time, removing the prime minister from power would not end the political crisis, as the 'patchwork' government consisting of the entire opposition would certainly collapse shortly after this goal was achieved.
- Compared to the opposition, the bloc around Netanyahu is much more politically cohesive and has been tried and tested in the past, but most polls predict that it will win much fewer than 61 seats, and even with the possible support of the Right party (which is a 'rotating' element in the pre-election calculations), it may not be able to form a majority.
- In the light of the above, the following scenario seems likely: no majority will be formed in the Knesset after the elections; the country will continue to be ruled by Netanyahu as head of an interim government, and the next (fifth) elections will be held in six months. If the Blue-Whites do not enter parliament (which is likely), Netanyahu as interim prime minister will be able to replace the ministers of this party (including those of defence, justice and foreign affairs) with people loyal to him; that will allow him to strengthen his power even without the backing of a parliamentary majority.
- Foreign policy is not an important topic in the election campaign, which has been focused on domestic affairs – principally the epidemic, its health, economic and social effects, and the assessment of the government's effectiveness in dealing with an emergency. The public view of the prime minister's actions is ambiguous; support for him has been negatively affected by his inconsistency and the politicisation of the crisis management. On the other hand, Netanyahu will get a political 'discount' thanks to the success of the national vaccination campaign: approximately 50% of the population had already received at least one dose of the vaccine. However, it seems that even the government's exceptional efficiency in the purchase and distribution of the vaccine has not been able to reverse the main political trend, namely the gradual weakening of Likud and the prime minister personally. Other subjects exploited by the opposition include

Netanyahu himself and his (alleged or real) political and legal abuses, as well as the state's attitude towards the ultra-Orthodox population. Over the past year, Netanyahu's dependence on ultra-Orthodox political allies has led to the state authorities displaying great lenience towards the systematic and ostentatious disregard of the quarantine regime which large groups of ultra-Orthodox Jews have displayed. This has caused anger and indignation from the rest of society (against whom the restrictions have been strictly enforced), and has translated into a boost in the polling numbers for the liberal Yesh Atid party (which is known for its demands to defend the secular nature of the state), to the extent that it is now one of the main opposition forces.