

Israel: a new election, a new prime minister

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On 30 June the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, adopted a motion to dissolve itself which had been submitted by the ruling coalition. A snap election will be held on 1 November. The coalition agreement laid out a rotation in the position of prime minister in case the term in office is shortened, therefore Prime Minister Naftali Bennett will step down, having taken office in June last year. On 30 June at midnight he was succeeded by the foreign minister and the head of the largest coalition party Jair Lapid. Lapid will be the temporary head of the government until a new government is sworn in, regardless of when this occurs.

Commentary

- This will be the fifth early election in Israel since April 2019 which proves that the country remains in a state of chronic political crisis. The crisis was not resolved by the short-lived government of Benjamin Netanyahu and Benjamin Gantz (May 2020-June 2021) or by the outgoing government of Bennett. Given the fragmentation of the Israeli political scene (at present there are 13 political groupings in the 120-seat Knesset, and some of them are multi-party), a relatively stable distribution of votes in consecutive elections and the fact that surveys are not predicting revolutionary changes in the popularity of the parties, it seems rather unlikely that another round of elections could lead the country out of the current impasse. A fundamental breakthrough in the political scene (personal and organisational) might be a way out of that gridlock but this is yet to occur.
- Slight shifts in the results of the election may however lead to a multi-party coalition with a hairline majority. It could be formed either as part of a wide alliance of right-wing forces with Netanyahu at the helm (the more likely scenario) or a new variant of the present anti-Netanyahu coalition headed by Lapid (less likely). Nevertheless, in both cases the possible coalitions will be fragile and subject to the risk of disintegration. It is also possible that there will be a post-election gridlock with none of the political camps able to form a majority. One of the consequences of that deadlock will be that Lapid will retain the position of prime minister for longer (Netanyahu was a 'temporary' prime minister from December 2018 to May 2020).
- Against the background of Israel's history, the Bennett government was an anomaly from the outset, incompatible with the traditional logic of the Israeli political scene. Seven Zionist parties were part of his government: the nationalist right (three parties), the centre-right (two parties) and the left (two parties). The eighth least numerous coalition party was a conservative and religious Arab party – the first one in Israel's history to have entered the government. The only element binding that alliance was their shared aversion

to Netanyahu. For some of the coalition partners it had an ideological basis – hence accusations made against Netanyahu that he broke the law (there are two criminal cases against him underway), that he was chauvinist, degraded political culture and escalated social divisions. In the case of the right-wing parties personal issues were also important – personal grudges and the hopes of winning the leadership of the right-wing political scene should Netanyahu's domination end.

- Despite a large dose of pragmatism, mutual respect among the coalition partners and initial successes (such as the adoption of a biannual budget and several reforms) the cohesion of the coalition was quickly compromised by internal contradictions. This was in part due to the aggressive politics pursued by the Netanyahu-led opposition. It had consistently voted against all motions submitted by the government (even those in line with the right-wing platform) and accused it of colluding with terrorists (i.e. the Arab party in the coalition) . In this context, the dissolution of the coalition was becoming increasingly inevitable. The decision made by Bennett and Lapid should be interpreted as a 'controlled fall' which has allowed the parties involved to regain, at least partly, control of the situation.
- The election campaign is likely above all to be a personal duel between Prime Minister Lapid and Netanyahu, who is aspiring to regain the position of prime minister. Other parties will play the role of potential allies of one of the camps. Issues of rising living costs and the threat from Iran and also the criminal case against Netanyahu will probably dominate the campaign.