

Israel, The Longer View

In electoral terms, Israel is now emerging as the most conservative nation in the democratic world

BY MICHEL GURFINKIEL.

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On the face of it, the latest Israeli general election, which took place on March 23, was just further confirmation of systemic political deadlock. For the fourth time in less than two years, the Knesset seems evenly divided between supporters and adversaries of Benjamin Netanyahu, and the prospects for a viable parliamentary coalition or a stable national unity administration look dim. As usual, many are blaming the country's electoral system, a system of near absolute (and nationwide) list proportional representation.

I'd like to express some dissenting views in this regard, and point to some counter-intuitive facts that should be taken into account as well.

Indeed, the March 23 ballot did not solve the Knesset's immediate arithmetical problems. The pro-Netanyahu bloc controls 52 seats out of 120 in the 24th Knesset—exactly as in the 23rd Knesset. And what passes for an anti-Netanyahu bloc, led by Yair Lapid, controls 39 seats. Netanyahu is likely to win the additional support of the national-conservative party, Yamina, led by Neftali Bennet, who got 7 seats, and thus to reach a 59-seat plurality. Lapid may rally the left and the far left, which grew from 7 seats to 13: He would then achieve a counter-plurality of 52. Still, one needs a majority of 61 to rule the country. The next step would be for either bloc to poach the required number of Knesset members from the opposite side; or rely on the Arab parties, which dropped from 15 seats to 10 but still hold the balance; or envision again some national unity government, along with byzantine “parity” or “rotation” arrangements.

As the president of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, suggested on March 31, “unconventional alliances” might eventually be considered. In the meantime, on April 6, he asked Netanyahu to form the new cabinet.

The outgoing prime minister (still encumbered by trials for corruption) was given a statutory 28-day delay to this effect.

Now let's take the longer view.

First fact: Whereas the election was inconclusive in terms of seats, the Netanyahu-led right clearly won in terms of the popular vote. The potential Netanyahu/Yamina alliance won 53.96 percent of the vote, while an alternative anti-Netanyahu, four-party coalition led by Lapid got only 30.9 percent. The combined left and far left won 10.68 percent, and the Arab parties 8.54 percent. The 3.25 percent threshold in votes that a list must pass to actually sit in parliament, and the corollary that “wasted votes” cast for parties who didn't make it are divided between the parties who did, explain the discrepancies between popular returns and actual Knesset seats. Technically, only the latter count. Politically, however, one cannot ignore the former entirely. All the more so when proportionality is seen as the ultimate warrant for legitimacy, as is the case in Israel. This is why some conservative leaders have been floating a bold proposal to solve the political conundrum: on an exceptional basis, a direct, quasi-presidential election of the prime minister.

Second fact: If conservatism is defined as the politics of national identity and national interest, Israel is now emerging as the most conservative nation in the democratic world. The openly conservative right (the Netanyahu bloc and Yamina) amounts to roughly one-half of the Knesset. Gideon Saar's New Hope is a splinter conservative group, whose only difference with Likud is a personal animosity toward Netanyahu. The same can be said, to a lesser degree, of Avigdor Liberman's Israel Beiteinu. One may speak, in ideological terms at least, of a potential 72-seat conservative majority. As for Lapid's Yesh Atid party and Gantz's Blue and White party, they are more liberal on social issues, but not quite so on economic or national security issues. Under certain circumstances, a conservative-centrist majority of about 100 seats in the Knesset would thus be feasible, against a 20-seat social-democratic, leftist, and Arab opposition.

Whatever the differences between the various conservative sub-groups in Israel, or the quarreling and in-fighting among conservative politicians, the present situation is a complete reversal of the left-wing domination that characterized the state's early years—say, from David Ben-Gurion to Shimon Peres—and is bound to have consequences in

those sectors where the left is still entrenched, such as the media, academia, and the courts. Moreover, it may prove an inspiration for conservatives in other democratic countries, including the United States.

Third fact: It is misleading to describe the Israeli parliamentary deadlock as a duel between two political blocs of equal strength. Clearly, there is a Netanyahu bloc, since its components, Likud and the religious parties, have been running together, and have stayed loyal to each other, for twelve years. However, there is no equally consistent anti-Netanyahu bloc, but rather a succession of volatile alliances involving ephemeral, ad hoc lists. There was a Yesh Atid/left alliance in 2013 and 2015, followed by a more conservative Blue and White/Yesh Atid alliance in 2019-2020, and now by an even more conservative Yesh Atid-dominated coalition. None of the previous alliances was strong enough to lead a government majority, even with the support of the far left or the Arabs. The current alliance is not likely to do better, and may even be more remote from such an outcome since many of its members oppose any involvement with the far left or the Arab parties as a matter of principle.

Why does the Netanyahu bloc hold better than any alternative bloc? Its best asset is Netanyahu himself. No Israeli politician—except Ariel Sharon—has been more intensely hated, either for rational or irrational reasons. On the other hand, no Israeli politician has achieved so much. Even die-hard opponents recognize that he has transformed Israel beyond recognition, turning it into a science and technology superpower with a booming economy (the nation's GDP grew 206 percent in the Netanyahu years), presiding over a top-notch military build-up, ensuring such strategic and diplomatic breakthroughs as the Abraham Accords, and engineering a nationwide Pfizer vaccination against COVID-19.

Netanyahu perceived at an early stage that Israeli society as a whole was moving to the right, and he was willing to capitalize on such a trend while most other politicians stuck to more static approaches. This is why the Likud's popular base remained loyal to him, in spite of the desertion of many Likud leaders. This is how he succeeded in building a lasting alliance with the ultra-Orthodox, in spite of his secular way of life, and winning the loyalty of most religious Zionists.

Fourth fact: The 2021 election signals drastic political change among Israeli Arabs. As of 2019, 21 percent of all Israeli

citizens (1.9 million souls) are of Arab descent and Arabic-speaking. Under the proportional electoral regime, ethnic Arab parties might thus be able to control 20 to 25 seats in the Knesset. However, their actual returns have always been much smaller: from 11 seats in 2013 to 15 seats in 2020 to 10 seats in 2021. One reason for this underachievement is that religious and clannish loyalties often interfere with political affiliation. A second, more compelling reason is that Arab parties have been sticking until now to extreme Arab nationalist views and vowing to terminate the State of Israel as it is, thus preventing any kind of trustful interaction with the Israeli Jewish majority—and any kind of political leverage. In turn, such a stand prevents a full mobilization of the Arab vote. (The so-called “Ramadan riots” that erupted this week in Jaffa’s Arab neighborhoods and other places reflect a similar miscalculation.)

In a bid to strengthen both the Arab vote and Arab representation in the Knesset, the ethnic Arab parties ran together as a Joint List from 2015 to 2020, with some arithmetic results, as noted. However, a new situation has arisen in the context of the Abraham Accords. When growing numbers of Arab states—including such flagships of modernity as the United Arab Emirates, or such paragons of Islamic piety as Saudi Arabia—claim Israel as a friend and a model, does it still make sense for Israeli Arabs to disclaim her? Ra'am, a Muslim party, drew the proper conclusion: It left the Joint List and ran alone on a platform of Jewish-Arab cooperation. For the time being, this has led to a decrease in Arab representation: The Joint List fell from 15 seats to 6, and Ra'am won 4 seats. But what if Ra'am joins a Netanyahu-led coalition, or, alternatively, supports a centrist-led coalition? (It caused a stir on April 19 when, along with the Joint List, it helped the anti-Netanyahu parties to secure control of crucial Knesset committees.) Chances are, under the new paradigm, that the Arab vote will rebound, and become a sizable factor in Israeli politics—on Israeli terms.

This is a momentous development indeed, and one that Western countries should follow closely. Liberal policies have largely failed in regard to Muslim immigration, either in Europe or in North America. Conservative policies, as long as they are genuinely conservative, may work much better.

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