

The New Israeli Government: Preliminary Implications and Long-Term Effects

by Ehud Eiran

A new Israeli government led by Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to take office on 17 May 2020 following the March elections, the third vote in eleven months. Initially, it seemed these had ended inconclusively, mirroring the results of the two earlier rounds in April 2019 and September 2020. By the end of March, however, Netanyahu, leader of the right-wing Likud party and the longest serving prime minister in Israel's history, orchestrated yet another political miracle.

Using the COVID-19 crisis, he convinced Benjamin (Benny) Gantz, the leader of the main opposition Blue & White party, to join him in forming a coalition. This, despite the fact that the block supporting the prime minister included only 58 Knesset¹ seats (36 of them held by Likud), while the block that opposed Netanyahu commanded 62 seats (33 of

them held by Blue & White).

To break the political impasse, Netanyahu used fear and political poaching. In almost daily press conferences on the COVID-19 emergency in March, he stressed the grave threat to the nation, calling on Gantz to join him in an "emergency" coalition government.

To many, this strategy was reminiscent of Netanyahu's earlier tactics, exploiting fear and divisions for political gain, as was done regarding the Oslo accords in the 1990s and Iran's nuclear project throughout the 2000s and particularly since 2010. Moreover, much like he did in the past – in 2011 to the Labour party and in 2012 to the Kadima party –, the prime minister has poached the leaders of opposition parties, convincing them to break ranks and join his coalition.²

¹ The Israeli Parliament.

² In January 2011, Labour's leader Ehud Barak led four other members of the party to create

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This, at the cost of the opposition party's implosion. Indeed, two factions of Gantz's party refused to join the coalition government.³ The official coalition agreement created parity in cabinet portfolios between Blue & White and Likud, alongside smaller parties on each block. More importantly, the agreement includes a rotating deal in which Netanyahu begins as prime minister, to be replaced by Gantz in 18 months.

Yet, it is far from certain that this government will survive as planned. Netanyahu's corruption trial is expected to start on 24 May. If the prime minister is found guilty he would have to step down, but only after all appeals are exhausted. The law also allows the Knesset to try and depose the prime minister in the timeframe between the initial judgment and the appeal. This may result in a return to the ballot box earlier than expected. As the trial progresses, Netanyahu may calculate that another round of elections could help him in the court house. The prime minister has already demonstrated he will go to great lengths to protect

his own party called Atzmaut (Independence). Labour left the governing coalition, but Atzmaut remained, allowing Netanyahu to retain power. In May 2012, in the midst of a set of no confidence votes that risked forcing an early election, Kadima – then the leading opposition party – joined the Netanyahu-led coalition, thus allowing the prime minister a longer term in office.

³ These include the centrist Yesh Atid party led by Yair Lapid and Telem led by Moshe (Bugi) Ya'alon. They later joined ranks under the name Yesh Atid–Telem, opposing the Gantz-Netanyahu coalition government. Two members of Yaalon's faction, however, joined the coalition, creating a new party called Derech Eretz (The Way of the Land).

himself from legal proceedings.⁴

Netanyahu is deeply committed to remaining in power. Beyond the ambition that propels politicians, Netanyahu seems to truly believe he is indispensable for the country's security. He is also convinced that remaining in office will shield him from the law. With a reputation for breaking promises, many observers believe it is highly unlikely that the prime minister will actually leave his post in 18 months as the coalition agreement stipulates.⁵

Independently from these uncertainties, the cabinet can be expected to be more moderate compared to the previous one. Gantz as Minister of Defence and his Blue & White colleague, Gabriel (Gabi) Ashkenazi, as Foreign Minister are more dovish than Netanyahu. The cabinet will also include two ministers from the centre-left Labour party, as well one minister from Derch Eretz, a breakaway from Blue & White that represents a right-wing voice that is deeply critical of Netanyahu.

One key issue facing the new cabinet is the question of annexation. The prime minister has been promising for a while that he will push for legal annexation of

⁴ Kobi Nahshoni and Itamar Eichler, "Netanyahu Responds: A Hunting Trip, a Blood Liable" (in Hebrew), in *Ynet*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5471690,00.html>.

⁵ "Lieberman: 'Zero Chance Netanyahu Will Keep Deal to Rotate Gantz in as Premier'", in *Arutz Sheva*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/279635>; Lior Kodner, "I Made Shamir Believe Peres: This Time Netanyahu Will Not Hand the Mandate" (in Hebrew), in *Haaretz*, 11 May 2020, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/digital/podcast/weekly/premium-PODCAST-1.8837914>.

parts of the West Bank into territorial Israel. Gantz took a similar position during the campaign, opening to an annexation of the Jordan Valley, a section of the West Bank. The Blue & White-Likud coalition agreement has placed some breaks on this process, which is not expected to go ahead before July, and uncertainty remains as to the actual extent of this move.

In final analysis, the decision whether to annex will mostly be affected by conflicting pressures on Netanyahu. On the one hand, a possibly fading opportunity to annex the territory, not least due to the uncertainty surrounding US support, particularly after the November elections, may accelerate this move. On the other, the potential costs of the action, including a possible collapse of the Palestinian Authority and a crisis with Jordan, may prevail. After all, despite his combative posture, Netanyahu is famously cautious and prefers not to take risky moves in the security arena that might affect his political horizons.

In this early phase, it seems there are at least four issues to consider as to the legacy of these elections and the events that followed. First, tensions surrounding the repeated elections further exacerbated the rift in Israeli society between Netanyahu's supporters and his opponents. Even if Netanyahu will leave the political scene, these tensions are expected to remain, as they reflect deeper rifts between a universalist-liberal vision for Israel and a particularistic ethno-centrist approach.

These rifts are constructed, at least in part, on tensions between different waves of immigrants to Israel. Broadly speaking, the descendants of people who arrived earlier in the Zionist project (mostly from Europe), tend to vote centre-left. Immigrants that arrived later, (mostly from the Middle East and former Soviet Union) tend to vote centre-right.⁶ Both sides seem to agree on the effect of the elections: a poll conducted by the "Israel Congress" – a civil society effort to bridge gaps between various groups in Israel – showed that 77 per cent of Israelis saw the last round of elections as contributing to greater rifts in society.⁷

The second longer-term effect of the elections is a further decline in public trust in the political class. Blue & White's *raison d'être* was to topple Prime Minister Netanyahu. Its leaders committed never to be part of a coalition with a person who is facing serious indictments.⁸ Yet, after this third round, the party (in a reduced form) did exactly that. Many former Gantz supporters expressed their opprobrium and some activists are even looking into the possibility of suing him and the party in court for breach of trust.⁹

⁶ These are generalizations and are not fully reflected in the leadership. Prime Minister Netanyahu, the leader of the right, actually belongs sociologically to the first group, while the leader of the centre-left Labour party, Amir Peretz, belongs to the second group.

⁷ Yulia Stanger et al., Israel Congress, 10 May 2020.

⁸ Lahav Harkov, "Gantz: Can't Sit in Govt with PM Under Indictment", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 2 September 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/gantz-cant-sit-in-govt-with-pm-under-indictment-600401>.

⁹ Alik Maor, "Activists of Hosen L'Israel/Blue & White Are Considering a Law Suit Against

Moreover, to secure the coalition agreement, Likud and Blue & White agreed to expand the cabinet, with ministers increasing gradually to 36 as well as 16 deputy minister posts, including some that have no real functional justification. Expenses for this increase are contrasted by critical voices to the vast unemployment and economic crisis brought about by COVID-19. Paradoxically, the same crisis that secured Netanyahu's political survival. Critical voices can be heard even within the Likud. For example, Gideon Saar, a former Likud minister and now an internal party foe of Netanyahu, tweeted on 31 March that "it would not be right to form the most bloated government at a time of the worst economic crisis".¹⁰

Thirdly, the elections have further demonstrated the crisis and decline of Liberal Zionism. The two parties that represented social democracy in the Knesset, Labour and Meretz, united before the elections for fear of not passing the threshold independently.¹¹ The party secured only seven seats (in the 120 seat Knesset). Then, three of the seven members entered the Netanyahu-Gantz coalition. This meek outcome sharply contrasts with Labour's dominance in Israeli politics as late as the 2010s.

Gantz" (in Hebrew), in *Megafon-News*, 16 April 2020, <https://megafon-news.co.il/asys/archives/319120>.

¹⁰ Gil Hoffman, "Blue and White Under Pressure to Compromise on Ministers", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/gideon-saar-complains-about-most-bloated-government-623053>.

¹¹ They were joined by a third faction, Gesher, led by a former right-wing politician, Orly Levy.

The vacuum created on the left is expected to lead to two processes. A greater willingness of some left leaning Zionists to vote for Arab-led parties. This is especially true as Ayman Odeh, the current leader of the Joint List (a coalition between the communists and three other Arab lists which came in third in the March 2020 vote, with 15 seats), has been communicating effectively with the Jewish electorate. On the other hand, Left-leaning Jews that may still prefer to vote for a Zionist party could work to create a new party, possibly around the existing Meretz and led by Gen. (Ret.) Yair Golan.¹²

Finally, the complex nature of the coalition agreement required the Knesset to amend some core aspects of Israeli constitutional order, including the term of the incoming government and the creation of the post of an "alternate" prime minister.¹³ While these arrangements were deemed crucial for the creation of a government, they also serve as a reminder of the fragility of Israel's constitutional order. The Supreme Court rejected petitions against the constitutional changes, perhaps as part of a broader path of caution it has taken after being blamed by Israel's right-wing as too liberal and too activist.

¹² Yossi Beilin, "Fall of Blue and White Party Leaves Opening on Israeli Political Map", in *Al-Monitor*, 20 April 2020, <http://almon.co/3ci2>.

¹³ Likud and Blue & White, *Coalition Agreement for the Establishment of an Emergency and National Unity Government in Israel*, signed on 20 April 2020, <https://israeled.org/resources/documents/coalition-agreement-for-the-establishment-of-an-emergency-and-national-unity-government-in-israel>.

This malleability has been taken as a sign by some analysts that Netanyahu may in fact be considering future constitutional changes to enhance the power of the presidency in an effort to “pull a Putin” and get himself elected as president.¹⁴ One piece of evidence that may support this theory is that Netanyahu’s term under the coalition agreement is designed to end a few months after that of Israel’s president in 2021, potentially making it easier for him to make this further political leap.

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¹⁴ Carolina Landsmann, “Netanyahu en Route to Presidency”, in *Haaretz*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-a-devious-elimination-1.8719569>. One piece of data that may support this theory: Netanyahu’s term is designed to end a few months after the end of the President’s term in office in 2021, making it easier for him to leave the Prime Minister’s position for the Presidency.

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