



Post-election Analysis

ISRAEL

Third consecutive victory for Netanyahu and the Likud

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Despite corruption charges, Netanyahu won elections for the fourth time and he will likely form a very similar government, although with slightly less support in the Knesset.

Likud got 36 seats, one more than its main opponent, the centrist coalition *Blue and White*. It was an increase of six members of Parliament, probably due to the bad result obtained by *Kulanu*, a centre-right party that lost six seats, going from ten to four. It seems that many of those who supported *Kulanu* in 2015 now backed *Likud* to secure its victory. At the same time, rightist parties altogether lost four seats due to the threshold of 3,25% of the vote. The *New Right*, founded by the ministers of Education and Justice, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, failed to enter the Parliament but received 3,22% of the votes.

Netanyahu will need all five rightist and religious parties to form Government. Both the religious *Shas* and *United Torah Judaism* increased in one their seats in Parliament, and now have eight and seven. The rightist *Israel Our Home* got five seats, one less than four years ago, the same as the more radical and new coalition *United Right*, while the moderate *Kulanu* now has four seats. Altogether, they have 65 members of Parliament, four more than the majority. That means Netanyahu will have to make concessions, foster agreements and reconcile opposing interests, and that will not always be easy.

One of their first agreements will have to do with the conscription of the ultraorthodox, since the Supreme Court declared illegal the law that allows a number of religious men to defer their entry in the Army. One of the parties in the coalition *United Torah Judaism* always refused to support a law that would require the ultraorthodox men to serve in the army, and that decision led Netanyahu to anticipate elections. On the other hand, *Israel Our Home* and its leader Avigdor Lieberman advocated for reducing the number of exemptions allowed. Some political analysts argue both parties could agree to reduce the exemptions allowed while postponing the sanctions in case of a religious infringement of their conscription quota.

The judicial process against Netanyahu could also lead to conflict within the cabinet. In the future, *Kulanu* and *Israel Our Home* could decide to abandon Netanyahu and try to join a Government coalition lead by *White and Blue*. That is not possible for the religious parties, which could not sit in the cabinet with the secular and centrist *There is Future*, strongly critical of the influence of ultraorthodox parties in Israeli politics.

This will be the fifth time Netanyahu will form a Government. He first did it in 1996, thanks to the *Likud's* victory over the *Labour Party* headed by Simon Peres after the assassination of Isaac Rabin. The left accused Netanyahu of fostering Jewish violence against the peace process with his critics to the prime minister for his concessions to the Palestinians. After losing the elections, he fought for the *Likud's* leadership with Ariel Sharon. In 2009, although the centre-right *Kadima* won the elections, only Netanyahu could form Government. Since then, the *Likud* and its leader won all three last elections, in 2013, 2015 and 2019.

If summer arrives and Netanyahu still leads the Government, he will become the prime minister with the longest term in office, setting aside David ben Gurion. Considered the father of Israel by the left, he won all five elections

he run up to 1963, when he retired from politics for the second time and could never come back again to the Labour leadership. To set him aside from rankings Netanyahu will depend on the judges and his partners in the cabinet. The Attorney General has already approved his indictment in three cases of corruption. Whenever there will be evidence of his conviction, his partners in Government could demand a change of leadership in the *Likud* or call for new elections.

If this happens, *Blue and White* will try to convince the electorate it is time to renovate Israeli politics. This election was disputed until the last minute, and *Likud* gained victory only after the last votes were counted, those of the hospitalized, the imprisoned, the soldiers and the Foreign Service members. Thirty five seats is a good election result for Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, leaders of *Israel Resilience* and *There is Future*. The former Army Chief of Staff and the journalist and secular politician will head the opposition to the prime minister, who will probably weaken with the indictment process, while waiting for new elections. Lapid, who lost the support of many voters in 2015 after sitting in *Likud's* cabinet, required Gantz to commit himself to never enter Netanyahu's Government. Blue and White's electorate is centrist or left-centrist and would never accept supporting a rightist Government, nor an indicted prime minister.

The new centrist coalition got its seats at the expense of the *Labour Party* losing 18 members of Parliament, from 24 to 6, its worst result ever. Four years ago it run in coalition with *Hatnua*, headed by Tzipi Livni, and they got the support of all those Israelis who are willing to vote any party that might be a real alternative to the Likud and the right. For the new Labour leader Avi Gabbay -a former *Kulanu* member of Parliament-, Livni was an unpleasant company, always advocating for a negotiated solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. He decided to break apart with her, and she decided to abandon politics once she realised nobody wanted her as an ally and the polls predicted *Hatnua* could never pass the threshold.

Now, only the extreme-left *Meretz* and the Arab parties publicly support to negotiate with the Palestinians. *Meretz* got 3.5% of the votes and just 4 seats. The Arab parties lost three seats after running in separate lists. Four years ago they run in a joint list afraid of the new threshold and got their best result ever, thirteen members of Parliament. These do not count when forming the Government in Israel; no party has ever tried to get their vote's support.

Israel will have the same prime minister and a very similar Government, waiting to know what Netanyahu will decide to do after his indictment process initiates: whether he will step back or hold on to power until the judges condemn him. Although he has been paving the way for a third option: to persuade his partners in Government to pass an immunity law to avoid being condemned while in office. If he succeeds, Israel would be walking into a dangerous ground.