



## Pre-election Analysis

# **ISRAEL** **General Elections to Settle a Bet**

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Five months after the past election the Israelis will return to the polls on Tuesday September 18<sup>th</sup> to settle a bet between the two most experienced right politicians. The acting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu opted for new election hoping to improve the outcome of April 9<sup>th</sup> and form a new government with his far-right and ultra-religious allies. On the other side, Avigdor Lieberman refuses to let his secular party Israel Our Home join another government led by Netanyahu because he wants to bring about a change in Likud's leadership hoping to become in the near future the new leader of the Israeli right.

Of the two, Netanyahu is the one that puts himself most at risk, since he needs to easily win the election and form a government with his natural allies to ensure his own political survival. If he fails, there will not be any chance of passing a law to shield him from prosecution on corruption charges, since only those parties have ever expressed their willingness to support such a law. In the election five months ago, Likud won 35 seats, United Right 5 and the ultra-religious Shas and Torah United Judaism 8 each. They needed five more seats to reach the majority needed to form a stable cabinet in Israel. The newly political venture of former ministers of Education and Justice Naftali Bennet and Ayelet Shaket got 3,22% of the votes, slightly below the 3,25% electoral threshold and didn't enter the Parliament. However, even if New Right had succeeded, it still would have been insufficient for Netanyahu to form government. To avoid such a "waste" of conservative votes almost all far-right parties have now agreed to join forces and form a new electoral coalition, Yamina, headed by the high-profile Shaket. Since they dispute the vote of nearly the same electorate the best idea is to join forces, especially when what is at stake is not only to access Parliament but to help Likud to form government and in return to influence its political decisions. Although the coalition of far-right parties favors Netanyahu since all its votes will translate into seats, he fears his party will lose votes in favor of the new coalition. That is why he has recently announced that if he wins and forms government, he will annex to Israel the Jordan valley, a Palestinian territory occupied by the Israeli army since 1967 located along the Jordan border and the northern part of the Dead Sea.

After the April 9<sup>th</sup> election Israel Our Home, which is mainly voted by the population of Russian origin, could have contributed to the government coalition with 5 seats. Nevertheless, its leader refused to sit in a cabinet headed by Netanyahu arguing he will be prosecuted for corruption as soon as the new Executive is formed. Lieberman's bet is quite a simple one. In case the Likud clearly wins the election and Netanyahu forms government, Lieberman will wait for the trial to take its toll on the prime minister so that his own cabinet partners and party colleagues will force his replacement. Meanwhile, he will appear as a responsible leader who puts the country ahead of his own political aspirations and refuses to raise someone who will be prosecuted in a few months to power. If, on the other hand, the election outcome does not allow Likud to form government with Yamina and the ultra-orthodox, he would have won his bet and will have the opportunity to force Netanyahu's immediate withdrawal from power. Opposition parties led by the centrist coalition Blue and White and his own Israel Our Home will press the most prominent Likud leaders to step forward and change Likud's leadership. This would result in new election and Netanyahu would not head the

electoral list for the first time in fourteen years – he has led it since Ariel Sharon split off from Likud in late 2005 to create his own party Kadima-.

A third scenario should not be ruled out. The election outcome might be quite similar to that of April 9<sup>th</sup> and neither the right nor the center-left may succeed in forming a new government. If this happens, voices will begin to emerge within the Likud demanding a primary election to choose a new leader, and some prominent politicians might even decide to split off and create their own political party. In the meantime, it should not be ruled out the formation of what in Israel is called a “national unity” government including the Blue and White coalition and the Likud -not headed by Netanyahu- or a major split. This cabinet would have an expiration date: when the Likud had a new leadership and forced elections again.

Whatever happens on Tuesday two things seem certain. The first is that all possible scenarios will lead to a new election in the near future; being the more distant if Netanyahu forms a government. Only when his prosecution on corruption charges had begun to take a toll on Likud, its members would initiate a fight to remove him from the party leadership. The second certainty is that all possible governments include at least one party from the right. Since the failure of the peace process, the Israeli left has been for decades fragmented, demotivated and has its lowest number of seats in Parliament –6 the Labor Party and 4 Meretz. Despite this, the two main left parties remain reluctant to join forces, although in this election they have created two small coalitions –Labor with the center-left Geshar and Meretz with the Green Movement.

In this situation, only center parties such as Blue and White can lead an alternative government. But, this does not imply leaving the right out of the cabinet but including the secular right - like Israel Our Home - in order to keep the ultra-religious and far-right parties far from government. This means the only real alternative to a Likud-led cabinet is to form a secular coalition that will put an end to the power the ultraorthodox parties have lately have with Likud. Having the left such few seats in Parliament, for the center to ever become a real government alternative excluding the right parties it should have the courage to accept the support of the Arab parties. These now have 10 seats in two coalitions although on Tuesday they expect to gain the three seats they lost on April by joining forces in the Arab Joint List -first created in 2015-. But although the Israelis of Palestinian origin make up twenty per cent of the population, Arab parties are still kept away from government and nearly no one in Israel supports counting on them politically.