

Pre-election Analysis

ISRAEL

Legislative elections 2019: Netanyahu masters the political tempo

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Israel is holding elections on April 9th, and it seems nothing will change. Although polls predict Likud's defeat, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will very likely lead again the next Government.

In 2015 the Likud won the elections with a Netanyahu's last-minute devious ploy. During the electoral campaign he had been threatening there would be a left-wing Government supported by the Arabs in case of a victory of the Labour-led coalition. Then, the same morning of the elections he called right-wingers to cast their votes because "Arab voters are heading to the polling stations in droves"¹. It was not true, but many voters decided to support the Likud to ensure a right-wing Government.

This time a new centrist coalition -Blue and White- fights for the victory. It's led by Israel Resilience Party, recently founded by a new rising political star -Benny Gantz- who was one of the five former Army Chiefs of the Staff who publicly supported two years ago the person holding that position. Gady Eisenkot was being strongly condemned by rightist radicals after saying that a soldier who had killed a Palestinian attacker once disarmed and on the floor should be convicted. Three of those five former Army Chiefs of Staff that criticised the nationalist and radical drift of the Israeli right are among the top four positions in the new coalition. That protects Blue and White from accusations of disregarding the security of Israel but not of having a hidden agenda. After all, Isaac Rabin was a labour politician with a prominent military career and he started the peace process with the Palestinians, which many Israelis blame of having endangered their security.

In that coalition, Yesh Atid and its leader Yair Lapid will try to appeal to voters concerned with domestic problems and the power religious parties have in politics. In fact, a law they promoted when in Netanyahu's Government nearly six years ago has resulted in early elections. The law made service in the army compulsory to all Jewish citizens, but allowed some exemptions if an annual number of recruitments were met. In 2015, Netanyahu and his new religious partners increased the number of exemptions, something deemed illegal by the Supreme Court. After several deadlines to the Government to modify the law, last November the Supreme magistrates decided that by mid-January it would start the conscription of all men who had deferred their military service because they were studying in a yeshiva or religious school.

Since one of the religious parties in Government -Agudat Yisrael- refused to support a law for the conscription of religious men, the prime minister would have needed a new coalition to pass it. That would have meant giving entry to the Cabinet to Yesh Atid or Yisrael Beiteinu and therefore going back to 2015, when Netanyahu called for early elections to get rid of the pressure of their leaders, Yair Lapid and Avigdor Lieberman. Ultra-orthodox parties are extremely convenient political partners if their religious lifestyle is not altered. They want the Interior Ministry to control immigration and orthodox conversions to Judaism, and rather quietly accept the rest of decisions of the Cabinet and the Prime Minister. On the contrary, Israel Our Home and There is Future are uneasy political parties in a Government which have their own political agenda and patiently wait the moment to become an alternative to Likud.

¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/17/binyamin-netanyahu-israel-arab-election>

Yisrael Beitenu (Israel our Home) was born as a sectorial party for voters of Russian origin and has been trying for years to transform into a rightist party for all citizens. Its goal is to attract "pure" right voters and get a good electoral outcome to sit in the Cabinet. His leader shows off a direct and aggressive style that sometimes a Prime Minister cannot use. As part of his direct rivalry with Netanyahu, in November Lieberman resigned as Defence Minister calling a "capitulation to terrorism" the cease-fire agreement with Hamas that was intended to put an end to the weekly protests near the border of Gaza.

Yesh Atid (There is Future) denies the left vs. right dichotomy and appeals to all those citizens who see their daily lives affected by the influence of religion in Israel. If he enters Netanyahu's Government he is accused of helping him to remain in power. If he calls for the support of former Labour voters the right accuses them of having a leftist hidden political agenda. Its great achievement is having survived in the desolate Israeli political centre that constantly consumes parties. But it desperately needs to have influence in laws to remain there.

Changing partners in Government was not a solution for Netanyahu while calling for early elections was. The polls predicted Likud's victory, and hopefully the rightist majority in Parliament could be improved. With early elections Netanyahu also expected the Attorney General would postpone his decision on whether to prosecute him, something the police had recommended in three of the four corruption charges they had probed. That did not happen and Netanyahu will be prosecuted, but the evidence won't be made public until after the elections. If the Likud's leader forms a new Government he will become the first Israeli prime minister to be prosecuted while being in office. Then, he will blame the magistrates for going against the democratic decisions of the Israeli citizens, which has been for some years one of the favourite right wingers slogans.

Magistrates -especially those in the Supreme Court- that actively work to ensure democracy in Israel and that have once again turned over the decisions of the Electoral Committee. They have vetoed a Jewish extremist leader in the elections and allowed the participation of all Arabs. If nearly four years ago Arab parties decided to join in a coalition fearing the 3.25% threshold would leave them out of Parliament, this time they again present political lists separately. A renovated Labour party will also take part in elections independently. Led by a former Kulanu -a centre-right party- member of Parliament, it has included some leaders of the social protests of 2011 in the top positions of its electoral list. Although after the high turnout in Labour elections in February some predicted a mobilisation of left and center-left voters, polls do not show high support for the party. Polls predict a slight victory of Blue and White over the Likud, although Hamas attacks and Israeli retaliation might have a direct influence on election results.