

Opinion

New Government, New President, New Israel?

Melanie Carina Schmoll, PhD

Israel in summer 2021 – the end of the pandemic seems to be near. Israel opens up, almost all mask requirements are cancelled, international travel groups are welcome and even the individual guests are allowed to travel to the Holy Land with almost no restrictions. It seems Israel is back in pre-pandemic times. But it is not the same country anymore. Some fundamental changes have happened over the last few weeks. When, in March 2021, the Israelis had to vote again for the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset, it was for the fourth time within two and a half years. The outcome was almost the same as the three times before. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's long-time prime minister, won most of the seats with his Likud party. As the State of Israel is a parliamentary democracy the executive branch or the government draws its authority from the Parliament (the legislative branch) and needs its confidence. Therefore, the prime minister is not decided directly by the voters but depends instead on a process of bargaining among the various fractions elected to parliament. In Israel, no single party holds most of the seats in Parliament and thus the process of forming a government is long and complicated.¹ Israel also has an extreme proportional system of government,

¹ For more information see Melanie Carina Schmoll, "Israel and the permanent siege: The people have spoken - who will find an answer to the needs of the voters?" *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 20, 1 (2019).

which grants representation in the Knesset to any party that passes a low 3.25 percent threshold in the election that takes place in a nationwide single district. On the one hand, this is a good thing because minorities in Israel are adequately represented in Parliament. However, representation comes at a price in terms of political stability and good governance². One peculiarity of the electoral system is the fact, that the President of the State, Reuven Rivlin, consults with representatives of all the parties elected to the Knesset, and therefore decided in March 2021, again, to charge Benjamin Netanyahu with the task of forming the government.

However, Netanyahu was not able to build a new government and almost out of the blue a new spirit was blown through the country. People and politicians felt that there came up the opportunity of a political change – a chance to end the political deadlock that enclosed the country for the last 2 years.

In democracy theories, political change is desirable because, on the one hand change, it stresses the former leaders support to the political and legal institutions. On the other hand, theorists expect a promotion of democracy. Promotion of democracy is closely linked to the benefits of power changes. In a study by Freedom House, political power changes are closely linked to civil rights. The study examined regimes within their transition to democratic regimes. The numbers were elevated after at least two democratic elections. Therefore, Maltz came to the conclusion that for example term limits are an important instrument of democratization: this is not just because they constrain the power of individual leaders, but also because they tend to promote political party alternation, which in turn fosters democratization.³ Term limit and power change develop better political rights and civil liberties in the perception of the citizens.⁴

This positive estimation of political rights and civil liberties after democratic political changes through elections, is based on the destruction of former (patronage) networks and concentration of authority. The destruction may be only temporarily, but because of this destruction, procedures and processes within the government can

² For more information see Gideon Rahat, "Why are there so many political parties and Why does that Fragmentation obstruct governance," *The Israel Democracy Institute*, 17 June 2019. <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/25792>, 17.06.2021.

³ Gideon Maltz, "The Case for Presidential Term limits," *Journal of Democracy* 18, 1 (January 2007): pp. 128 – 142.

⁴ Ibid.

become more transparent and more compliant.⁵ Ramseyer underlined already back in 1994 that power change increases the motivation for democratic behavior among political actors is empirically proven.⁶ Therefore, democracy means change and change is valued positively. Having said that, the political changes in Israel are positive from within themselves.

Political Deadlock

The last two years in Israel have been marked by unprecedented political paralysis. Since April 2019, the country has been through four elections. Three times, unsuccessful coalition negotiations gave way to decisions by Israel's 120-member Parliament to dissolve itself and hold a new election. The country has been operating on autopilot with a caretaker government since the end of 2018. And with polls predicting the same gridlocked parliament, neither a right-wing religious bloc nor a center-left bloc to get a 61-seat absolute majority. Thus, a fifth election seemed like a realistic scenario. The paralysis stemmed from a confluence of factors. The first was the corruption trial for a polarizing Prime Minister Netanyahu that has clogged up parliamentary maneuvering, making a majority beyond reach. Israel's longest-serving leader faced charges of fraud, breach of trust, and bribery in three cases. As long as the prime minister remained in power, the electorate's true preference - a centrist, secular, national unity government, remained unfulfilled. Despite that, Netanyahu has stubbornly clung to the premiership. There is no legal requirement that he resign. He has kept members of his Likud party solidly behind him by arguing that he is the only one capable of leading the country. Netanyahu has also convinced right-wing religious party allies to stay loyal, organizing them into a bloc that has vowed not to join a government under his rival.⁷

⁵ Charlotte Heyl and Henrik Maihack, "Mosambik: Mehr Zeit für den Präsidenten?" *GIGA Focus* 12 (2011).

⁶ J. Mark Ramseyer, "The Puzzling (In)Dependence of Courts: A Comparative Approach," *Journal of Legal Studies* 23, 3 (1994).

⁷ Joshua Mitnick, "Why Israel's Political System is Broken and How It Can Be Fixed," *Foreign Policy (Dispatch)*, (2020): <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/27/israel-election-netanyahu-gantz/>, (17.06.2021).

The second complication is Israel's tribal politics. Israeli society is extremely diverse, with multiple political divisions that run along ideological, ethnic and religious fault-lines.⁸ Parties based around social identity have become inflexible about whom they will partner with in a coalition. Over the years, for example, Israel's ultra-Orthodox parties have evolved from acting as kingmakers between the left and right blocs to solidly identified and loyal to the right-wing.

Meanwhile, the party representing Israel's Arab minority has been delegitimized by centrist and right-wing Israeli politicians as a group of terrorist-supporting lawmakers who oppose Israel's definition as a Jewish state. The United Arab List (UAL) is officially Islamist but broke from the Joint List before the last elections.⁹

With identity politics as an electoral wedge, it is more difficult for Israel's proportional parliamentary system to deliver a decisive outcome. In Israel, the electoral redundancy has meant less efficient governing. The country has been led for more than two years now by interim governments that have limited authority to address budget issues and make key appointments. As a result, a larger-than-anticipated budget deficit has gone unaddressed; a new multiyear plan for the military has languished; a much-needed infusion of funds for the health care system has failed to materialize; and top appointments in the police department and state prosecutor's office have been postponed.¹⁰

In order to form a coalition in Israel, the prospective ruling party has to attain a majority of at least 61 seats out of the 120 seats in the Knesset. Because of the proliferation of small parties, this task is impossible without cobbling together an alliance of several smaller parties – and this is basically what happened within the last weeks.

The New Government

Based on the results of the latest elections in Israel in March 2021 and the failure of Netanyahu to develop a new coalition, President Rivlin gave the mandate to Yair Lapid. Lapid is the leader of Israel's center-left Yesh Atid party. Yesh Atid is the second

⁸ For more information see Gideon Rahat, "Why are there so many."

⁹ For more information see Linda Averbukh, "Towards Jewish – Arab Normalization in Israel," *SWP Comment*, 18 March 2021.

¹⁰ Mitnick, "Why."

strongest party in the Knesset with 17 seats. Lapid was the central figure in stitching together the coalition. He is a former newspaper columnist and talk show host.

However, the new government is led by right-wing figure Naftali Bennett from Yamina. To secure Yamina's vital support, Lapid engineered a plan to share the premiership with Bennett. In the first two years of this government, Lapid will be foreign minister and alternate prime minister. Bennett will hand over the premiership to Lapid in August 2023 for a further two years. Bennett's Yamina party holds only 6 seats in the new Knesset. No Israeli has ever held the post of Prime Minister while heading a faction with so few parliamentary seats. His political career has often seen him attacking Nethanyahu from the right, but now he is co-head of a coalition attempting to outflank Nethanyahu from the moderate side. Upon realizing that Bennett would hold the balance of power after the election, Lapid ceded the first rotation as prime minister. The two men have worked together in government previously and have excellent chemistry, but the new coalition will only succeed if their mutual trust remains rock solid.¹¹

Holding a bare majority of 60 seats in the 120-member Knesset (because one member refused to support the new government) the new coalition is a colorful mixture. There are three right-wing parties with 19 seats: Bennett's Yamina (6 seats after at least one defection), Gideon Saar's New Hope (6), and Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beitenu (7). Then two centrist parties with 25 seats: Lapid's Yesh Atid (17) and Benny Gantz's Blue and White (8), further two left-wing parties with 13 seats: Labor (7) and Meretz (6) plus The United Arab List (UAL) with 4 seats. UAL leader Mansour Abbas will not hold a ministerial position in the cabinet. It is the first predominantly Arab party to be part of a governing coalition although Arabs have sat in every Knesset since Israel's founding. This new government faces an opposition composed of Netanyahu's Likud Party, a hard-right faction, and two ultraorthodox parties, totaling 52 seats in all. The unprecedented hybrid coalition of parties on the right, center, and left is held together by a pledge to avert further elections and end Nethanyahu's tenure, and united

¹¹ David Makovsky, "Israel's Proposed Power – Sharing Government: Policy Implications and Prospect of Survival," *Policy Watch (The Washington Institute)* 3496 (June 2021).

by a belief that the prime minister's ongoing corruption trial has eroded his commitment to preserving the legal system's independence.¹²

Therefore, it does not seem curious that the coalition agreement focusses on a general outline of social and economic issues, in addition to passing the state budget and building new infrastructure like new hospitals and an airport. The agreement also aims to formulate legislation to limit the prime minister's time in office to two terms, or eight years. This would halt any potential plans by Benjamin Netanyahu to run for office once again. On the more controversial internal issues like state and religion, the coalition agreement will maintain the status quo. However, some reforms are expected when it comes to the diversification of kosher food (food satisfying the requirements of Jewish law) certification.¹³ Certainly, the government will have to deal with important issues such as passing a budget for 2021, dealing with the criminal violence engulfing many Arab towns in Israel, deepening relations with the (non-Palestinian) Arab world and opposing Iran.

Especially when it comes to Iran, the new prime minister lost no time and said already in his speech on his election day in the Knesset:

The government is setting out on its path, as the greatest threat to Israel, the Iranian nuclear project, is reaching a critical point. The Middle East is still yet to recover from the effects of the first nuclear deal, which emboldened Iran to the tune of billions of dollars, and with international legitimacy. Iran, through its Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard, has established terrorist outposts - from Syria, through Gaza and Lebanon, and to Yemen. Renewing the nuclear deal with Iran is a mistake that will once again lend legitimacy to one of the most discriminatory and violent regimes in the world. Israel will not allow Iran to be equipped with nuclear weapons. Israel is not party to the agreement, and will maintain full freedom to act.¹⁴

Right after the new government was sworn in, the radical Islamist Palestinian Hamas welcomed the new leaders with incendiary balloons. These balloons were launched from the Palestinian enclave Gaza in the first such attacks since a fragile

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For more information, see <https://www.timesofisrael.com/whats-inside-coalition-agreements-yesh-atid-signed-with-change-bloc-partners/>, 17.06.2021.

¹⁴ See the full text of the speech here: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/full-text-incoming-prime-minister-naftali-bennett-s-speech-in-the-knesset-1.9901473>, 18.06.2021.

ceasefire ended 11 days of deadly fighting in May 2021. The violence poses an early test for the government of new prime minister Naftali Bennett. There were no reports of casualties on either side and the Egyptian-mediated truce that halted fighting between Israel and Palestinian militants did not immediately appear to be threatened by the flare-up, with the overnight Israeli airstrikes giving way to calm – at least for now. This first interaction showed that Bennett’s word has to be taken seriously. In his speech at the election day in the Knesset Bennett declared:

I hope the ceasefire in the south is maintained. But if Hamas again chooses the path of violence against Israeli civilians, it will encounter a wall of iron. Violence and terrorism are not a natural phenomenon or destiny with which we are supposed to just come to terms. The Palestinians must take responsibility for their actions, and understand that violence will be met with a firm response.¹⁵

In regards to Hamas and Iran, the new government seems to be determined to show strength and resolution – no matter how fragile the coalition might be.

With a view to the future of the fragmented Israeli society Bennett promised: “And I assure it is a government that will work for the sake of all the people. We will do all we can so that no one should have to feel afraid. We are here in the name of good, and to work. And I say to those who intend to celebrate tonight, don’t dance on the pain of others. We not enemies, we are one people.¹⁶”

The New President

Besides the obvious changes on the governmental level, another political change in Israel happened within the last few weeks. The Knesset elected a new President of the State of Israel. A new president might not be too interesting for non – Israelis, because his power is very limited and he works mostly as representative for the State. Nevertheless, the president plays an important role when it comes to elections in the country and at least therefore his position and his personality shall draw attention. The

¹⁵ See the full text of the speech here: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/full-text-incoming-prime-minister-naftali-bennett-s-speech-in-the-knesset-1.9901473>, 18.06.2021.

¹⁶ See the full text of the speech here: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/full-text-incoming-prime-minister-naftali-bennett-s-speech-in-the-knesset-1.9901473>, 18.06.2021.

fact that the President of the State consults with representatives of all the parties elected to the Knesset, and decides who is in charge of forming the new government, gives him way more power than just a representative role.

This new President will start his term in July 2021. Isaac Herzog was elected Israel's 11th president with 87 votes of Knesset's 120. Herzog underlined, like Bennett, that "he'll work to 'build bridges' within Israeli society."¹⁷ Besides his role after elections the president also has the power to pardon people and grant clemency. This fact might become a key issue should Netanyahu be convicted in his ongoing corruption trial.

Isaac Herzog was the chairman of the Jewish Agency and former head of the Labor party. He is the son of Israel's sixth president, Chaim Herzog, and the grandson of Israel's first chief rabbi. In his 15 years in the Knesset, he became known as a soft-spoken and mild-mannered manager. He ran respectful campaigns and declined to take part in the kind of angry political feuding that have come to define the country's fractious politics.¹⁸ Many analysts see Herzog as able to facing the society torn by Arab – Jewish strife and to build social bridges. The president should be able to act politically effective within the framework of his mandate, be historically inspired and act socially relevant. Herzog showed already only days after he became president-elect, that his entire attitude to his role is different than his predecessor. Israel's next president became a social media darling when pictures of him shopping at his local Jerusalem grocery store went viral. The Times of Israel called him "Super-President."¹⁹ Even if this is certainly not a valid and profound analysis, it gives a hint what Israeli society is looking for.

The New Israel?

Both new main figures in Israeli political landscape represent a generation change. On the one hand, President-Elect Herzog, who is 60 years old, seems to be

¹⁷ More information can be found here: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/isaac-herzog-elected-israels-11th-president-with-87-votes-of-knessets-120/>, 18.06.2021.

¹⁸ More information can be found here: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/isaac-herzog-elected-israels-11th-president-with-87-votes-of-knessets-120/>, 18.06.2021.

¹⁹ More information can be found here: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/man-of-the-people-president-elect-herzog-spotted-grabbing-groceries/>, 18.06.2021.

much younger and more agile than 81-year-old Rivlin. An anecdote about Herzog going grocery shopping with a shopping list shows a different type of politician. No matter if it was a well planned PR trick or not, Herzog gives “time for hope and optimism.”²⁰ He seems to represent the liberal, secular part of Israeli society. He also provides continuity because Israeli public knows him and his family for a long time and very well. Providing continuity in a way is on the other hand also true for 49-year-old Naftali Bennett who came to power because Yair Lapid, the coalition manager, was willing to wait for two years before becoming prime minister. Lapid understood that Bennett would hold the balance of power after the election in such a fragile coalition with members of almost all political parties – excluding Likud and two ultra Orthodox parties. Bennett is the first Israeli prime minister who considers himself orthodox and wears a Kippa (skullcap worn by orthodox male Jews). He might be able to get support of the Haredim (orthodox Jews, strictly following the Jewish law) and other Orthodox Jewish groups. Even if Nethanyahu calls him and his government left-wing, he is certainly not. Bennett is a man of the *national camp*, and he said recently “I am more right-wing than Bibi [Nethanyahu] but I don’t use hate or polarization as a tool to promote myself politically.”²¹

Although it is unlikely that Israel is going to change overnight just because of a new government and a new president, some changes will be seen soon. Especially the friend – and foe driven approach to governance will be lessened. This includes the bitter rhetoric that went along with it. Also, to focus on issues most members of the government can agree with, is a new approach. Areas in which parties agree are: to end the pandemic, to work for economic growth and to reduce socio-economic inequality. To find a solution for infrastructure issues like the crowded Israeli roads is something parties do agree about. It might not always be clear how the solution can look like, but at least the various fractions agree on the problems themselves.

Political change is desirable, because change stresses the former leaders support to the political and legal institutions. Nethanyahu is now able to demonstrate his

²⁰ Pini Dunner, “President-elect Herzog and a time for hope,” *The Times of Israel Blog*. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/president-elect-herzog-and-a-time-for-hope/>, 18.06.2021.

²¹ The entire interview can be found here: <https://theworldnews.net/il-news/bennett-i-m-more-right-wing-than-bibi-but-i-don-t-use-the-tools-of-hate>, 18.06.2021.

understanding of democracy and the rule of law by using the democratic tools of an opposition leader and to stand trial on corruption charges.

Political change also leads to a promotion of democracy. Therefore, it is helpful to focus on things the different groups can agree on and which give the ability to finally work on the problems in a democratic manner. If these issues will be solved or are on a good way to be solved, the government might be able to tackle more hot topics like judiciary for example – also in a democratic style.

A discussion about term limits might be helpful to promote democracy, as well. Term limits would constrain the power of individual leaders and they tend to promote the exchange of power between different political parties more frequently, which in turn fosters democratization.

Power changes are linked to civil rights and liberties, this is an important factor for all coalition partners, especially for the Arab members. A positive estimation of political rights and civil liberties after democratic political changes through elections, is based on the destruction of former (patronage) networks and concentration of authority. These developments are expected with the new government sworn in. The destruction may be only temporarily, but procedures and processes within the government can become more transparent and more compliant. Since power change increases the motivation for democratic behavior among political actors. Some first changes in the democratic behavior among the political actors can be already observed: Yair Lapid, who was able to build the coalition, brought some new qualities into Israeli politics, like patience and self – sacrifice. The power to foster compromise between the political parties is his greatest feature.

Democracy means valued positively changes and the political changes in Israel are positive from within themselves. The changes might not be a huge turning point in Israeli history, but they are certainly the end of an era and the beginning of something different.

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