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Israel: The 2015 Elections

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Since its establishment, Israel has been ruled by coalition governments. In its 67 years of existence, no political party has ever had a parliamentary majority, and this situation will likely continue into the foreseeable future. Therefore, it is neither the number of votes that parties win nor even the number of Knesset members they can seat that determines the outcome, but rather who is capable of building a coalition. Following the March 17, 2015 elections, a right wing government with the addition of one centrist party is expected, even though the center-left bloc won 63 Knesset seats – a majority of the vote. The reason is embedded in Israel's political structure, whereby not every party is willing or able to sit with every other party in a coalition.

Background

The March 2015 elections were unusual in Israel's political history. It was only the second time – and the first time in 53 years – that a Knesset election took place two years after the previous one (the law stipulates a Knesset term of four to four-and-a-half years). The past is replete with parliaments that failed to conclude their terms in office, a phenomenon that has become something of an Israeli norm, but other than these two cases elections have been moved up by only a few months or, at most, one year.

The reason that the 2015 elections were held only two years after the previous elections – which did little to add to the sense of governance stability – lies in the results of 2013, when Benjamin Netanyahu sought to establish a coalition with what he calls his “natural partners” who, among them, controlled 61 seats in the Knesset, with the addition of one other party. However, due to an ad hoc alliance between Habayit Hayehudi and Yesh Atid (the reason for which is a subject beyond the scope of this essay), a different government that included Yesh Atid, Habayit Hayehudi, and Hatnua but excluded the ultra-Orthodox parties was essentially forced on Netanyahu. The government often found it difficult to function and by late December 2014, as a result of the controversial *Israel Hayom* bill relating to the press, the debate over the bill that would have declared Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, and the proposed 2015 budget, tensions had peaked. The Prime Minister, apparently influenced by the results of polls in November-December 2014 that forecast a right wing bloc of 70-75 Knesset seats under his leadership, decided

to disband the government and call for new elections. This entailed a big gamble on his part that paid off at the end of the day, though neither easily nor free of upsets.

Results

The primary outcome of the election is Netanyahu's ticket to another term in office. The election hinged on Benjamin Netanyahu himself and whether he would continue to serve as Prime Minister or would be replaced by opposition leader Yitzhak Herzog. And while this question was decided in the incumbent's favor, Netanyahu was not chosen prime minister in a direct election. Rather, his reelection results from the composition of the 20th Knesset, which reflects the actual vote as well as the Israeli coalition building dynamics.

First, the numerical results. It is common to view the results in terms of blocs, i.e., a right wing/ultra-Orthodox bloc and a left center /left /Arab bloc. This division is far from accurate because neither bloc is homogeneous – each has differences not only of nuance but of a fundamental nature among bloc members. Still, for the sake of analysis and especially in terms of possible coalitions, there is no choice but to speak of blocs, though since Yesh Atid's impressive success in 2013 and even more so after the last election, there are three blocs to speak of: right wing/ultra-Orthodox, left/Arab, and center.

Impressions notwithstanding, the right wing/ultra-Orthodox bloc did not win a majority in the 2015 election; in fact, it lost four Knesset seats. In the 20th Knesset, the right wing bloc consists of 57 seats (Likud – 30, Habayit Hayehudi – 8, Israel Beitenu – 6, Shas – 7, and United Torah Judaism – 6), versus the 61 seats it controlled in the previous Knesset. The left wing/Arab bloc grew by two seats – thanks to the Arab parties' Joint List's gain of two MKs – and currently holds 42. The center too grew by two seats and currently controls 21 (Yesh Atid – 11, and Moshe Kahlon's new party, Kulanu – 10).

The changes in the Knesset map all occurred within the blocs. Likud won a large victory and increased its strength by 50 percent with 10 new seats – an impressive achievement by any criterion. But this growth came entirely at the expense of the right wing bloc – five seats from Yisrael Beitenu, four from Habayit Hayehudi, and one from United Torah Judaism (while Shas lost four seats). On the left/Arab side, Labor joined with Tzipi Livni's Hatnua, and Shaul Mofaz's Kadima party, which held two seats in the previous Knesset, disappeared, thus reaching (under the new name of the “Zionist Camp”) 24 seats (after taking one seat from Meretz), an achievement it has not seen since the 1992 election. In the center, Kulanu emerged to share 21 seats almost equally with Yesh Atid, two more than the 19 seats Yesh Atid alone garnered in the previous election.

More than in the actual electoral results, the fundamental weakness of the left emerges in the critical stage of coalition building. The Joint List, which is currently the third largest party in the Knesset with 13 seats, is a loyal member of the bloc within the opposition but will not – by its own decision – sit in any coalition. Indeed, before the election, its leaders

announced the party would not join any coalition, not even one headed by Herzog and the Zionist Camp. A manifestation of the inherent difficulty of the Joint List to cooperate in the setting of a government and a coalition with Zionist Jewish parties – a difficulty stemming from the Israeli-Palestinian and Jewish-Arab conflict – was evident in the Joint List's refusal to sign a surplus vote agreement with Meretz, the most pro-Arab and left wing party on the political scene (an agreement that could have garnered the Joint List another seat) and its refusal to recommend that the President appoint Yitzhak Herzog to form the government. Without the Joint List, the left wing and center blocs have only 50 seats, too few to form a coalition. And that is the underpinning of the key result of the election – the continued premiership of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Finally, three phenomena may reflect future trends:

- a. The increased power of the two large parties: For the first time in years, the two large parties are close to a Knesset majority (54 seats). If the trend continues, it could have much bearing on governance and the political landscape in Israel.
- b. The increased power of the Joint List: Arab representation grew by two seats, making this the first time that Arab representation in the Knesset is equal to ultra-Orthodox representation. This results stems primarily from increased voter participation in the Arab sector, although it is still lower (by at least 10 percent) than Jewish voter participation. If Israel's Arab citizens continue to increase their voting rates and close the gap with Israel's Jewish citizens, an Arab party could reach 18 seats. If this is accompanied by greater willingness to fully assimilate into the general Israeli political system, this could have a dramatic effect on the nature of future governments and the whole political landscape.
- c. In recent years, every election has seen the rise of a new party that wins a large chunk of votes. There seems to be a segment of the population that votes either in protest of the existing situation or in search of something that is absent in the existing political parties. Should this trend continue, this too could have an important effect on the political system.

The New Government

It is too early to know with absolute certainty the composition of the new government; Netanyahu has several options he could pursue. However, there will most likely be a narrow government consisting of Likud, Kulanu, Habayit Hayehudi, Israel Beitenu, and the ultra-Orthodox parties, which would have the support of 67 MKs – the number of MKs who recommended that the President appoint Mr. Netanyahu to try to form the next government. As to this government's path and policies, the dominant figure will be the Prime Minister who will enjoy a large degree of flexibility and freedom of action when it comes to the political and security stance the next government will adopt.