

An Instrument of Change? Israel's New Hardliner Government

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Israel's "change government", which brought down 15-year Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, will struggle to be an instrument of change because its eight diverse components disagree on how to handle core issues. On Palestine, this government will almost certainly continue Netanyahu's policies of colonisation and repression because any attempt to effect change on this existential issue would blow up the coalition. Its partners extend from parties representing the far right through centre right, the left and Israel's Palestinian citizens.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennet — who heads an ultranationalist religious party with only six seats in the 120 member Knesset — is a hardliner on Israel's colonial enterprise and rejects any Palestinian entity in the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.

His unlikely partner for several years of the engineer of the disparate coalition, Yair Lapid. He is regarded as a centrist on Israel's political spectrum which has shifted right-wards since the Likud took power in 1977. If the coalition survives until September 2023, alternate prime minister Lapid is slated to take over the top job. He will hardly seek to attempt any "changes" that will prevent him from taking over.

The third prime mover of the coalition is Avigdor Lieberman, head of the secular right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu Party, who has been determined to bring down Netanyahu for several years. He has served in several Israeli governments as foreign and defence minister and is to assume the influential post of finance minister. He has expropriated the post of chairman of the Knesset finance committee for a member of his faction.

Two ministers were in Netanyahu's most recent Cabinet. Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz, retains the defence portfolio, and New Hope founder Gideon Sa'ar, the justice ministry. Both are deputy prime ministers.

All five have served under Netanyahu and broken with him personally due to his authoritarianism, failure to honour commitments, and arrogance, rather than his policies.

Ministries assigned to the centre-right Labour Party and leftist Meretz cover areas where there can be moderate change on the domestic front while the Ra'am, the Israeli's Palestinian fundamentalist party has not claimed a ministry but chairmanship of key Knesset committees.

Ra'am is the first Palestinian party to participate in an Israeli government although there have been Palestinian ministers belonging to other parties in government. Until now only Zionist Jewish parties have been at the heart of the ruling establishment. Ra'am's head Mansour Abbas has secured promises of benefits for Israel's 20 per cent neglected and marginalised Palestinian minority, including funding for municipalities, schools, and public services, increased policing to fight a spike in crime, and an end to Israeli bullying of bedouin.

While Abbas may have bought benefits for Palestinian Israelis, many if not most are uncertain about Ra'am putting in power a coalition, heavily weighted in favour of the right. During the Netanyahu years, they have forged increasingly close connections with Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank, rejected being called "Arab {rather than Palestinian} Israelis" and reclaimed their Palestinian identity.

Furthermore, the "change government" will have to deliver some if not major change. World public opinion has been alienated by the Netanyahu era, moved away from regarding Israel as a special case entitled to impunity over its never-ending occupation, land grab, harsh treatment of Palestinians, and attempts to drag the US and the West into a war with Iran.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has launched investigations into alleged Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity. The UN Human Rights Council has set up a permanent commission to probe Israel's May onslaught on Gaza and other actions against the Palestinians. Amnesty International has dared to apply the word "apartheid" to the system of governance Israel imposes on the West Bank.

"The perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity have evaded justice for more than half a century. An ICC investigation marks a long-overdue step towards justice for victims, and is a chance to end the cycle of impunity that is at the heart of the human rights crisis in the [occupied territories]," said Saleh Higazi, Amnesty's deputy regional director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Last month, Ireland's parliament adopted a motion branding Israeli settlements and policies in the occupied West Bank "de facto annexation". This amounts to the most forthright characterisation of the situation in the West Bank by any European Union legislature. Ireland is not alone.

Democratic Party members of the US Congress have castigated Israel and urged the US government to suspend \$3.8 billion in military funding for Israel as well as millions proposed to resupply its "Iron Dome" system which has protected Israel from rockets from Gaza while Israeli warplanes bomb the unprotected coastal strip with a population of two million Palestinians.

Having ignored developments on the international scene for most of his latest 12-years in power Netanyahu continues to behave as usual — hectoring opponents and accusing "change" of betraying Israel and risking its security. He enjoys the support of his Likud

Party, the largest in the Knesset, and the hard right nationalist and religious parties. However, a slender majority of Israelis are fed up with him. They have shifted to parties represented in the coalition — mainly because they are weary and wary of Netanyahu — and resent his drive to exploit Israeli divisions in order to evade prison for breach of trust, fraud and bribery in his ongoing trial in a Jerusalem court. Now that he is not prime minister he could be the second Israeli premier to do jail time — after fellow Likud leader Ehud Olmert.

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