

Israel's Election Is All About Netanyahu

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Israelis are going to the polls for the fourth time in two years. It's a weird election, to be sure, in part because for some it's so very important, while for others so very little is at stake.

The only suspense for much of the Israeli public and Israel's supporters in the US is whether this election will finally finish off Benjamin Netanyahu or give him yet another term as prime minister. Since he's been Prime Minister for 15 of the past 25 years — including the last 12 years — this election is really all about Netanyahu.

Netanyahu has always been a deeply polarising figure. Yitzhak Rabin's widow blamed him for inciting the hatred and violence that led to her husband's assassination. He ran his first campaign promising to end the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and left his first term in office in 1999 with that process mortally wounded.

While Netanyahu has always been a far-right ideologue, he has never hesitated to feign moderation or cast off faithful allies if it would secure his hold on power. In the last 12 years he has been prime minister, his brazen quest for power has led him to become increasingly autocratic. Not only has his behaviour alienated members of his own party and other partners who felt betrayed by his usurping authority and his broken promises, it has also resulted his facing trial for charges of gross corruption and misuse of his office.

Netanyahu's policies during the past 25 years have also frustrated the Democratic administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, while endearing him to Republicans, especially from the neoconservative and Christian fundamentalist wing of that party. This was compounded during the past four years by his complete embrace of Donald Trump.

There are, of course, other issues in this election, maybe the most significant of which is the alliance Netanyahu has made with the ultra-Orthodox parties. Though he is not known to be an especially religious person, for electoral reasons, he has been tied to the hip with these parties. They give him votes and he continues allowing them to be exempted from military service, providing them with generous subsidies and granting them a veto over matters of religious practice. What should be of even greater concern is how, born of his desperate desire to win, Netanyahu has courted and promised a ministerial post to the overtly racist Kahanist party. It is deeply troubling that there has been so little negative fallout in Israel or in the US over this inclusion of a party that has been implicated in acts of terror against

Arabs and Jews who do not adhere to their fanatic messianic nationalism.

As has been the case in the past three elections, polls show that the pro- and anti-Netanyahu coalitions are near evenly split, making it difficult to predict which will emerge victorious. His Likud grouping remains the strongest of the parties, but together with their allies in the religious parties, they do not appear able to secure the 61 Knesset seats needed for him to remain as prime minister.

Netanyahu's opponents, most of whom were former Likudniks or former partners with Likud, despite collectively winning more seats than Netanyahu's coalition, also appear to be short of the 61-seat majority. To even come close to that number, they will need overcome their personal animosity for one another and include the support of the major bloc representing the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Relying on Arab support, however, remains anathema to most of these parties.

So not unlike the last election, for a new government to be formed, it will be necessary for some party leaders to hold their noses and make deals with rivals whom they either dislike or don't trust. This is pretty much what happened after the last election when one of Netanyahu's rivals joined with him to form a government, breaking faith with his own party.

Since both Netanyahu and his leading opponents all largely agree on maintaining Israeli control and expanding settlements in most of the occupied lands, denying Palestinians full sovereignty and freedom, and denying equal rights to Palestinian citizens of Israel — this election won't be about peace with justice. It will be between Netanyahu and a collection of "I'm not Netanyahus." It is an election about whether his corrupt and autocratic rule should be rewarded and if kowtowing to the religious right should continue.

Many of Israel's liberal supporters in the US believe that a Netanyahu defeat will be important to restore support for Israel among Democrats. This is, at best, a delusion. While Netanyahu created tension with the Democratic establishment, it is Israeli policy and a growing awareness of what Palestinians have been forced to endure under occupation that has caused the split — not only between the two parties, but between the Democratic base and the party's leadership in Congress. So, while getting rid of the corrupt autocrat might clean up Israel's image for some, it will not fundamentally change attitudes, unless there is a change in policy. And this is not on the agenda of any of Netanyahu's opponents.

For Palestinians and their supporters, it is bewildering to hear commentators in the US refer to this election as being one that pits the right-wing (Netanyahu and the religious parties) against a centre-left coalition. Bewildering, because Israeli politics has moved so far to the right, that what can properly be called the left will not be able to amass more than one-sixth of the seats in the next Knesset. They will be in no position to shape the policies of the next government — whether it is led by Netanyahu or a coalition of his opponents.

Maybe the only new and negative dynamic in this election has been the rupture of the Joint Arab List that, for a time, brought the more than two million Arab citizens of Israel under one roof. Suffering from systemic racism, inequities in employment and government services, and police neglect and violence, one of the Arab parties was courted by Netanyahu with the promise of greater support. They split from the Joint List, failing to learn the lessons of the past. Netanyahu will betray them, as he has with his other allies time and again. Polls now show that this party, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, may barely win enough votes to enter

into the Knesset, while the major bloc of the Joint List will win only eight or nine seats, as opposed to the 15 they won when unified.

For more than five million Palestinians living under occupation, this election is “much ado about nothing” as it will only change which party governs the occupation. In fact, their concern is that a new face at the helm may cause Israel’s supporters in the US to breathe easier for a time, buying Israel some good PR, but it will not change their lives or the ever-deepening hold Israel has over their lands and their future.

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