

Israel's Third Election: Netanyahu Wins, Justice Loses

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Israel just completed its third national election in less than a year. The first two votes in April and September 2019 ended in an impasse with no party able to form a governing coalition of 61 Knesset Members (i.e. a majority of the 120-member body). While the result of this third round appears to be as muddled as first two, it also consolidated several profoundly disturbing trends that are shaping Israeli politics.

It is not as if nothing happened in the intervening months since Israelis first went to the polls in April. In fact, there were a number of dramatic developments.

In the first place, Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the Likud Party and current Prime Minister, was formally indicted on charges of political and financial corruption. His trial may begin in just a few weeks. His attempt to secure immunity from prosecution failed. Now Netanyahu's opponents are attempting to pass legislation that would bar a Knesset Member under indictment, meaning, of course, Netanyahu, from serving as prime minister.

The past few months also saw the release of the Trump Administration's "Deal of the Century". Since it gave Netanyahu everything he could have hoped for, the "Deal" might be better called "Trump's Gift of the Century". In remarks delivered in Jerusalem just a week before the election, Netanyahu described the benefits of the "Deal" in this way:

"For the last three years I've worked very closely with a good friend of mine, President Trump...to fashion a different plan for peace in the Middle East...

"A few weeks ago, I stood as an Israeli prime minister in Washington next to the president of the United States, who said that the United States will recognise Israel's sovereignty over the Jordan Valley, the northern Dead Sea and all the... Jewish communities large and small, in Judea and Samaria. This is a breakthrough..."

Another factor that impacted this round was the extent to which Netanyahu's opponents surrendered in the face of his continued racist incitement against Israel's Palestinian Arab citizens. Netanyahu continued to insist that should Benny Gantz, the leader of the Blue-White Party, be victorious, he would "partner with terror supporters" (which is the way Netanyahu describes Arabs) to form a new government. Not only did Gantz go overboard in asserting that he would not "partner" with the Arab Knesset Members, he also embraced many of Netanyahu's policies, acceptance of the Trump "Deal" and the promise to annex large portions of the occupied West Bank.

Finally, there was the total collapse of what had at one point been a limited, but still numerically strong, liberal current in Israeli politics. The Labour Party, which in 1992 held 44 Knesset seats, was only able to elect three Knesset Members as part of the paltry seven member bloc they were forced to form with two other failing parties.

When the votes were counted, Netanyahu's Likud won 36 seats in the new Knesset, while Gantz's Blue-White won 33. With his partners, far-right and ultra-religious parties, Netanyahu can tally up only 58 seats, not enough to govern. Gantz, on the other hand, can claim only 40 seats.

There are two parties that remain outside of these calculations. The Arab parties, who coalesced as the Joint List and won 15 seats, have been rejected as potential partners by Gantz and, more importantly, have made it clear that they could not support him after endorsed policies they find abhorrent. Then there are the seven seats held by Avigdor Lieberman's far right, secular and anti-Arab Yisrael Beitenu Party. Lieberman's party could give Netanyahu the majority he needs to form a government, but it is a fervent opponent of the religious parties and Lieberman insists Yisrael Beitenu will not sit in a government with them.

So, Israel remains at an impasse. Even with the uncertainty that follows this third round, there are a few observations that can be made based on what has happened during the past year.

Even though he appears unable to form a government and may yet end up convicted of the charges against him, Netanyahu has won. His poisonous anti Arab rhetoric, his demagoguery and his insistence on denying any Arab rights in the occupied lands now define Israeli politics. Despite having three serious indictments hanging over his head, Israelis voted for him because they support his policies, his racism and his rejection of Palestinian rights. Not unlike the way US Republicans have turned their backs on decency and the rule of law in their embrace of Donald Trump, Israelis have embraced Netanyahu, whom they now call "King Bibi". Even those who deplore him personally and reject the divisions he has exploited within Israeli Jewish society nevertheless support the policies he has advanced.

Along with this, it is important to acknowledge the end of the myth of the "Israeli peace camp". While there are still courageous Israelis who continue to fight against the occupation and for Palestinian human rights, they are not an electoral force and have no power to impact Israeli policy. Netanyahu has succeeded in intimidating politicians who might have played a role in the Knesset in opposition to his policies. He and his colleagues also used their power to pass laws that penalised and weakened peace groups.

Another major contributing factor to the death of the "peace camp" has been the cowardice of past US Administrations, whose acquiescence to Israeli policy, even when mildly criticising it, served to feed and empower the Israeli right, while starving and weakening the Israeli left.

With agreement on so many of Netanyahu's policies vis a vis the Palestinians and the occupation, the major issues now dividing Israel's two major political camps, both on the right, are Netanyahu, himself, and the role of religion in governance and personal affairs.

As a result, the Arab-led Joint List, now the third largest political party, is the only real Israeli

peace camp. And as the Israeli government moves to annex key areas of the West Bank and expand Jewish settlements in the occupied lands, it is paving the way for a one-state apartheid reality in which the Joint List will become the major fighter for democracy, equal rights and justice for the entire Israeli and Palestinian populations.

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