

The Only Way Israelis Can Form a Government: Betrayal

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As expected, the outcome of Israel's second national election was as murky as the first round in April. During the next few weeks, Israeli leaders will be engaged in negotiations in an effort to form a government. The double-dealings and the betrayals that will need to occur for them to form a governing coalition will make "House of Cards" look like a tea party.

The reasons for this are simple. The results of the election were close and inconclusive with no grouping, neither the one led by Prime Minister Netanyahu nor that of the main opposition led by former general Benny Gantz, in a position to easily cobble together the 61 Knesset seats needed to form a majority. In addition, there's the fact that all of the major players have made, and continue to affirm, principled pledges which, if honoured, will make creating a governing coalition impossible. Hence, either there are betrayals of pledges or partners, or there will be no new government.

What follows is the state of play and the pledges made by all of the principled actors.

Gantz's Blue and White coalition won 33 seats. The two "left" parties with which he can align won 11 seats (seven for Labor-Gesher and six for the Democratic Union). This only gives Gantz a total of 44 seats.

While most analysts also incorrectly add to Gantz's total the 13 seats held by Joint Union (made up of four parties representing the Palestinian citizens of Israel), this will not occur for two reasons. Gantz made a pledge not to form a government "dependent on the Arabs". And, for their part, the Arab parties have said that while they would not vote against a Gantz-led government, if it meant ending Netanyahu's rule, they would only consider joining a governing coalition on the condition that it was committed to full equality for the Arab citizens of Israel and ending the occupation. These are conditions to which Gantz is ideologically opposed.

Gantz might also seek to include the 17 seats held by the two ultra-religious parties, since this would give him the 61 he needs to form a majority. But Blue and White ran on a decidedly secular platform and he would find it difficult to add the religious parties who would demand that the government continue to provide funding for their institutions and uphold a number of restrictive religious prohibitions. This would put Gantz at loggerheads with the secular nationalist voters who formed his support base.

Since many of the Blue and White leadership were originally connected to Likud, it might appear logical for Gantz to turn to Likud, which won 31 seats in this election, in order to form a national unity government of the right. But here too, there are problems.

In the lead up to negotiations, Likud's leader, Benjamin Netanyahu secured a pledge from his partners (the two ultra-religious parties and the right-wing nationalist party, Yamina, which holds seven seats) that they would remain united and negotiate as an unbreakable union, under Netanyahu's leadership. If this unity is upheld, it effectively rules out any partnership with Gantz who has insisted that he would not form a government on Netanyahu's terms and certainly not with Netanyahu as the Prime Minister. In addition, if the Likud-led grouping maintains its unity, this would require Gantz to accept the religious parties and their demands.

Now while Gantz can claim the right to lead efforts to form the next government, since his Blue and White coalition won the most seats (33), Netanyahu, despite only winning 31 seats, is claiming that because he is entering the negotiations with a stronger hand, since his base of support is larger (a total of 55 Knesset seats — his 31, the religious parties' 17, and Yamina's seven), he should be the one to set the terms. This is, of course, out of the question for Gantz, since he has ruled out joining a government under Netanyahu and he will not form a government with the religious parties and their requirements.

If this seems murky, it's because it is. And so Israelis are left with either a third election or watching their leaders betraying their partners and their pledges.

Seventeen members of the Likud might choose to betray Netanyahu, by dumping him as their leader and joining a Gantz-led government. This might occur if negotiations continue past the October date when the Attorney General has said he will begin proceedings that, in all likelihood, will lead to Netanyahu being indicted for crimes of corruption, bribery, and betrayal of the public trust.

There is also the possibility that Netanyahu could convince Avigdor Lieberman to rejoin his Likud government. The eight seats held by Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party would give Netanyahu 63 seats. But this would require Lieberman breaking his pledge not to join any government that is subservient to the demands of the religious parties. He's done it before, and if Netanyahu's offer/bribe is good enough, he might betray his pledge and do it again.

There is another scenario that cannot be discounted. Since Netanyahu remains Prime Minister during the negotiations, he could provoke a national emergency, like a war in Gaza or on the northern front. He might feel that in the midst of a crisis, he would be in a stronger position to force concessions from Gantz and/or Lieberman.

Then there's the less likely possibility that the long-awaited "Deal of the Century" is announced with terms unacceptable to right-wing Israelis in Lieberman's and Gantz's camps — thereby also playing into Netanyahu's hands, allowing him to plead for national unity to avert the crisis posed by the US demands. As I said, this is quite unlikely, for two reasons. Trump has already demonstrated his own capacity for betrayal by distancing himself from his "good friend Bibi". And, it is hard to imagine that the "deal" would include any terms that would provoke a crisis in Israel.

Finally, there's the very strong possibility that Netanyahu is indicted, forced to make a plea deal, and leave public life — or even go to prison. While this would clearly reshuffle the deck, it wouldn't necessarily put Gantz in the driver's seat, since that would depend on whether the remaining Likud membership continued to maintain their pledge of unity with their religious party partners, or betrayed them by joining a Gantz-led secular government.

Should that happen, yet another betrayal may occur. With a coalition government of Blue and White and Likud — minus Netanyahu — the third-largest Knesset grouping, the Joint List would rightly claim the right to lead the Knesset Opposition. This would give them an unprecedented role in Israeli society. In an effort to block this, some have suggested that the two religious parties, having been betrayed and dumped by Likud, may combine their 17 seats and demand the right to lead the Knesset Opposition, thereby denying Arabs their hard-fought victory.

It is of critical importance to note that in all of this haggling and betrayal, there is no mention of or concern for the rights of the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. Israeli society has moved so far to the right that Palestinians were not considered in this election. With the exception of the small left Democratic Union, all of the other parties were fine with settlement expansion and extending Israeli sovereignty to major parts of the West Bank, the annexation of Jerusalem and the continued strangulation of Gaza.

The fact that there is so little focus in the West on the continued denial of Palestinian rights is the ultimate betrayal. Press coverage of the elections and the follow-up negotiations make no mention of Palestinians or the occupation. And the unwarranted liberal embrace of Gantz, as the “not Netanyahu”, is its own form of betrayal — of the values of justice, human rights, and equality to which liberals claim to adhere.

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