



ISRAEL'S FAST-APPROACHING ELECTION

A Short Primer

Israel recently announced its fourth election in two years, following three dysfunctional governments in a row. Unlike in the US, if the state budget is not passed within a certain amount of time (it wasn't), the government falls. This is but one way of several that the government can dissolve itself before its four-year term finishes.

Another difference from the US is that here there are not just two major political parties, but many. No party has ever won a majority of the voters. Therefore, coalition governments consisting of numerous parties are the rule. In past decades, either Labor or Likud have usually been the largest party, requiring many disparate parties to join a coalition to achieve a majority of 61 MKs.

Now, after three previous elections in which Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu of Likud became Prime Minister, there is a real possibility the mold will be broken. Bibi has already served as Prime Minister more years than any other, eclipsing David Ben-Gurion for that title. And he is currently on trial with three indictments against him, which – if found guilty – could result in jail.

Consequently, Bibi must divide his time between running the government and defending himself in court. Many people, including me, believe this task is too much, even for an accomplished politician still thought to be the most qualified leader by a plurality of Israeli voters. Consequently, breakaway politicians from various parties are opening up possibilities of a government that excludes Bibi.

Israeli voters are overwhelmingly on

the right side of the political spectrum. According to the latest Jerusalem Post poll, the (left) Labor party – which ruled Israel for decades – might fail to win a single seat in the next Knesset. The left could be represented by only 18 seats in the 120-member Knesset, and that would be mostly due to the United Arab List, augmented by the tiny, far-left, Meretz contingent. Another two parties of observant and ultra-orthodox Jews usually join with the right-wing, but might be excluded this time.

This time around, center and right parties, without Likud, may total more than 60 seats, leaving Bibi out of a job and out of the ruling coalition. The latest polls show a former Likud member, Gideon Saar, heading the new, second-largest party behind Likud. There is the possibility that other party members may opt-out of Likud, prompting the remaining members to push Bibi aside to allow Likud to join its ostensible allies on the right, sans Bibi. (However, early polls tend to be inaccurate.)

Bibi Netanyahu has failed to form a successful, functioning government after three serial elections. These were prompted by his decision to prematurely dissolve the previous government two years ago. It's tempting to believe that Bibi is following a long line of successful heads of state who lingered on past their "sell-by" date, failing to leave office at the top of their game and thereby diminishing their legacies.

However, Bibi is still the politician most Israelis prefer to be Prime Minister. His historic leadership has brought Israel into the 21st century, made Israel one

of the world's most powerful nations, brought the world's attention to Iran's nuclear weapons development, secured peace treaties with four (and counting) Arab countries, and led Israel to be foremost among all Western nations in vaccinating its citizens.

Although the election is on March 23, it's too early to make predictions from inexact polls. (In Israel election campaigns are conducted in months, not years like in the US.) There is only a short time before the various parties must submit their party lists to the election authorities in early February. We expect more tumult on the part of current politicians and political wannabes, the latter including retired IDF generals/chiefs of staff. Some of the generals serving as MKs may quit, leave their party for another, or even form their own new parties. Tel Aviv's incumbent mayor just threw his hat in the ring. Whatever the result of this election, Israelis can only hope for a functioning government to serve its full four-year term. Stay tuned...

An earlier version of this article appeared on israelseen.com.

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