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Bibi vs democracy

An election victory for Benjamin Netanyahu could spell the end of the separation of powers in Israel

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What if he would actually win? Unlike in the last elections, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cannot claim victory yet. But Netanyahu, the nefarious, tricky and passionate campaigner, who hasn't even flinched from the dirtiest tricks ('fake news'), will literally fight for his life until election day on 17 September 2019. That's exactly what it's all about for him: he's threatened with prosecution for corruption in three cases. If he's convicted, he will face several years in prison. Already in October, just three weeks after the election, the Prime Minister has to go to a hearing, after which the Attorney General will file charges, probably in December at the latest.

But as far as Netanyahu is concerned, it shouldn't even come to that. He must have at least 61 mandates in order to govern (the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, has 120 seats). The opposition parties and Avigdor Lieberman's right-wing party Yisrael Beiteinu ('Israel, our house') don't want to be involved in Netanyahu's machinations. So he must hope to win as many seats as possible with his Likud and then, in a coalition with ultraorthodox and messianic nationalists, be able to whip through the 'law of all laws' in the shortest possible time: a law that grants him immunity and cancels the Supreme Court's judicial review function allowing it to overrule legislation.

If he succeeds, then the 'only democracy in the Middle East', as Netanyahu never tires of boasting, has ceased to exist in its present form. The rule of law would be history at the very moment the Supreme Court lost its independence.

Throwing the country under the bus

The fact that Netanyahu, with plans for such a coalition, finally feeds the state to the orthodox and national-religious forces is an additional

problem. Because in view of the imminent trial, his potential coalition partners know that Bibi can be blackmailed. Their 'price' in the coalition negotiations will likely be high. And it's clear what these forces want: an annexation of the occupied territories on the one hand, a Halachic state (a state managed according to the laws of religion) on the other. Of course, this will not happen overnight. But it would be one, very significant step in that direction.

But if Netanyahu makes it, there will be no one left to stop him.

In fact, it looks as if Netanyahu is prepared to throw the country under the bus for his own good. He never gets tired of stirring up hatred against 'the Arabs', 'the left' and 'the media' during this election campaign. He has done this before and promoted the division of Israeli society. But the fanaticism with which he now rants against his political opponents doesn't have anything to do anymore with a normal democratic conflict. And apparently, he can afford it. Because there's nobody in the White House who would hold him accountable. On the contrary. Even if Netanyahu was an outstanding demagogue long before the election of Donald Trump, the threat of imprisonment and the 'role model' Trump make it easier for him to drop any reservations.

What this means for Israel in the long term cannot yet be foreseen. Just as anti-democrats poison the public discourse in Hungary, Poland, Italy, Austria, Germany, other European countries and, of course, in the US, so do Netanyahu and his supporters.

Two possible scenarios

And even if Netanyahu were to lose the elections and thus leave Israel's political stage for good, his legacy will last for years. Politicians like Ayelet Shaked, the former Minister of Justice, or Naftali Bennett, the former Minister of Education, but also some Likud politicians will take over the 'Bibi Speak' or have done so already. The father of hatred would be gone but his children enjoy excellent health and they spread.

If the next prime minister were actually no longer called Netanyahu, a Herculean task would be waiting for the successor on the domestic front. He would have to reunite the country, fight racism, protect the state institutions, above all the judiciary, and strengthen trust in them again. He would have to restore a new culture of dialogue full of respect, esteem

and liberalism. And that's just one side of things because of course there's also the conflict with the Palestinians, the danger from Iran, the possible war with Hezbollah in Lebanon and/or Hamas in Gaza and much, much more.

But if Netanyahu makes it, there will be no one left to stop him. Trump is not interested, Putin is a 'kindred spirit', the hopelessly disunited and perhaps soon disintegrating EU has no influence in the Middle East anyway. Netanyahu could change course and act as he pleases.

These days in Israel you hear two scenarios again and again: 'We will then leave the country' or 'Then we will go out to recapture our democracy, the rule of law'. Israel could face extremely difficult times. But anyone who believes that civil war could take place is wrong: Netanyahu has still managed, in domestic crises, to play the external threat card so effectively that everything falls into line. Because when it comes to the survival of the Jewish state, then, but only then, all Israelis stand together.



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