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Israel elections: Netanyahu again short of a majority

After inconclusive results, Netanyahu could try form an unlikely alliance with Jewish ultra-Orthodox, ultra-nationalist factions and an Islamist party

On Tuesday last week, Israeli voters fulfilled their democratic duty for the fourth time in two years. Although turnout dropped slightly from 71.4 to 67.3 per cent, there is no obvious sign of voter fatigue yet. Now, the attention shifts from the 6.5 million eligible voters to the 120 newly elected members of the Knesset, who will determine the composition of the next government and the choice of prime minister.

In December last year, the national emergency government formed in May 2020 – consisting of Netanyahu's Likud, the religious parties and parts of the Blue-White electoral alliance – failed to pass a budget for 2020 and 2021. As a result, the parliament was dissolved and snap elections announced.

According to the election's preliminary result, incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may find it difficult to rally enough MKs behind him to remain in power. Currently, Netanyahu's right-wing bloc has 52 seats, nine seats short of a governing majority.

Surprisingly, it's the Arab party Ra'am with four seats that could become kingmaker. The Islamist party has not yet declared whether it will support efforts by Netanyahu – who is certainly not a natural ally – to form a governing coalition or whether it will side with the opposition parties.

Netanyahu's opponents have won 57 seats and although they could achieve a majority with Ra'am's support, it remains doubtful whether such a cooperation could work, as the individual parties of such a coalition are very fragmented.

If none of the blocs succeeds by the end of May, the country could face its fifth election since 2019.

What does the result show?

The proportional electoral system makes it almost impossible for a single party to win an election outright. According to the Central Election Commission, the prime minister's right-wing Likud party received 24.2 per cent of the vote. The centrist Yesh Atid party of main opposition leader Yair Lapid came second with 13.9 per cent. Accordingly, Likud gets 30 seats in the 120-seat Knesset and Yesh Atid 17.

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Netanyahu's political allies, the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties Shas and United Torah Judaism, get nine and seven seats respectively. Defence Minister Benny Gantz's centrist Blue-White party could get eight, while the Labour Party and the nationalist Yamina and Yisrael Beitenu parties could get seven each. The Joint List of Arab Parties, the New Hope Party of Netanyahu's former ally Gideon Saar, the far-right Alliance of Religious Zionism and the left-wing Meretz Party each won six mandates.

The fact that there's a political stalemate again reveals the deep divisions in Israeli politics. There are those who are for Benjamin Netanyahu and those who are against him. With efforts to find potential defectors having already begun, a wide variety of political constellations remain possible.

It looks as if Netanyahu's surest way to secure another term in office would be a highly unusual one: forming a coalition with Jewish ultra-Orthodox, ultra-nationalist factions and an Arab Islamist party. There's doubt on all sides whether this could really work out.

Who could tip the balance?

It seems that both Netanyahu and his rivals will need the support of Yamina and Ra'am to achieve a majority.

Ra'am split from the Joint List earlier this year, partly because its leader Mansour Abbas had said he was open to working with Netanyahu if he addressed the needs of Israel's Arab citizens more fairly, who make up about 20 per cent of the population. After the election, Abbas said he was willing to work with both sides.

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Smotrich's faction includes representatives who advocate the ideology of Greater Israel, demand the transfer of Palestinians to Jordan and intend to discriminate against LGBTI persons.

So far, no Arab party has ever been involved in government in Israel. Moreover, none of these parties share the right-wing ideology of Netanyahu's Likud.

It would be desirable for Israel's population to be spared a fifth round of elections. With a poverty rate of over 20 per cent and unemployment of 16.7 per cent, it would anything but responsible.

Yamina is led by Netanyahu's former protégé and defence minister Naftali Bennett, with whom he has a difficult relationship. Like Abbas, Benett has not yet announced which candidate he will recommend to President Reuven Rivlin to form a government.

Why is the outcome important?

The future prime minister will lead one of the most powerful countries in the region, the country that the US considers one of its most important allies. After the cosy relationship between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu, the new US administration's reaction has been rather cold so far.

The next government will also shape relations with the Palestinians and Arab countries. Netanyahu opposes a fully independent state of Palestine in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, and supports Jewish settlements in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem. The settlements are considered illegal under international law, although Israel denies the allegation.

A centrist or centre-left government would be more likely to try and revive stalled negotiations with the Palestinians and consider territorial concessions in return for peace.

Finally, the political deadlock has been exacerbated by the unprecedented situation of a prime minister who insists on remaining in office under indictment. His trial is due to resume in a fortnight. Netanyahu denies any wrongdoing. Among his allies, however, there is still talk of radical measures, including retroactive immunity rules and significant restrictions on the powers of the Supreme Court.

The last four elections have shown one thing above all: most predictions about possible governing coalitions have been belied by the complexity of Israeli politics and the inventiveness of individual actors.

It would be desirable for Israel's population to be spared a fifth round of elections. With a poverty rate of over 20 per cent and unemployment of 16.7 per cent, it would anything but responsible. Hopefully, enough determined politicians will come together who care more about the good of the country than their own ambitions. In this stalemate, it should be possible to form a transitional government that, after three years of provisional budgetary management, will be able to draw up a national budget, allowing the economy to recover after several lockdowns, create jobs for the unemployed and consolidate the health and education systems.



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