



Israel's Electoral Quarantine is over.

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Unity Government and Netanyahu's political  
prowess.

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*Israel has been through 3 elections in less than a year. In the shadow of the skyrocketing COVID-19 outbreak, political stability seems to be one of the country's main needs. Benjamin Netanyahu - despite being legally persecuted - reached a deal with Benny Gantz, for a unity government led by the first. Netanyahu's political maneuvers will keep him at the helm of Israeli government and the deal between the two sides points out many thought-provoking aspects of the country's politics.*

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Since April 2019, Israel has been through 3 electoral processes. Notwithstanding the narrow timeframe between them, none of the elections could lead to the formation of a government, considering that no political alliance was able to achieve the 61 seats needed for acquiring the majority in the Knesset. Netanyahu's Likud party won the April 2019 elections, as well as the ones of March 2020, obtaining 36 seats in the last ones. The centrist Blue and White coalition, on its part, won the September 2019 elections and came second in the March 2020 ones, getting 33 seats.

Despite the electoral crisis, a fourth consecutive elections within almost a year is a scenario that seems to recede. During the last days of March, a unity deal between the current Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu and the leader of the Blue and White political alliance Benny Gantz, was made public.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the main topics of the pre-electoral period and the stakes of the elections are: first, the allegations against Benjamin Netanyahu for corruption and the ongoing investigations on this matter. Second, the reshaping of the dynamics within Israel's political context given the emergence of new parties and coalitions and the interplay between them. Finally, the country's regional and international role projected and conducted by the new government, a that has always been of great importance.

From all the 8 parties that won seats in the 23rd Knesset, it is also worth mentioning the Joint List, an alliance of mainly Arab parties that came third with 15 seats, in the last elections. The wide support that this party received was due to the underrepresentation of Israel's Arab citizens within the political context and their willingness to have representation and equal rights. The success of the Joint List in the elections proved that the voice of the Arabs is getting increasingly represented and will strive for a fair and equal treatment within their own state. Thus, Joint List's trajectory from now on will be an interesting dimension of Israeli politics.<sup>2</sup>

Despite being the third party with almost 575,000 voters supporting it, Joint List did not join forces with either the government or the opposition; yet, it expressed readiness to support a possible Gantz-led government. Due to some Joint List members being accused of anti-Zionist beliefs, neither Netanyahu or Gantz showed any intention to include them in the government scheme. Likewise, Yair Lapid, who will most likely lead the opposition, has already distanced himself from political individuals and entities that express the voices of Arab citizens. Thus, this shows that cooperation between Arab and Israeli parties remains a taboo for Jewish-Israeli political forces.<sup>3</sup>

Coming back to Israel's broader political scene, after three electoral processes and failed attempts to form a government, a unity government scheme with Netanyahu and Gantz being the men at the helm, was undoubtedly an unexpected outcome. Blue and White members, as well as their allies, were lacking a strong common ideological background. As a matter of fact, their common ground was mostly the "anyone but Netanyahu" rhetoric adopted by Gantz during the whole pre-electoral period. Therefore, his allies, to no one's surprise, accused him of betrayal and handing thousands of voters that actually voted against Netanyahu, directly to him. As a result, The Blue and White party was dissolved and 15 of the 33 total elected Knesset Members opted for Gantz.<sup>4</sup>

For his part, Gantz stated that he chose Israel's interest over politics, under a state of national emergency, since Israel could not withstand a fourth round of elections, especially under a major health crisis with huge impact within the society. The former head of the IDF chose to reach a deal with Netanyahu, claiming that he put aside micropolitics and personal or party interests and strived to prevent the prolongation of the political paralysis that has been stagnating Israel's politics, for over a year.

The deal between the two men is reportedly geared towards a 3-year government, with Netanyahu initially serving as Prime Minister until October 2021, while Gantz will be serving as Defense Minister. After October 2021, Netanyahu is expected to relinquish his position and be succeeded by Gantz. The ministries and portfolios will be distributed to trusted members of all the parties that will compose the imminent government scheme. Likud's Yuli Edelstein is likely to take office as a Foreign Minister. Another thing to note, is the expected incorporation of the Amir Peretz-led Israeli Labor Party and its merging with Blue and White party, despite the fact that some of its members criticize Netanyahu

and do not wish to participate in a “corrupt” government.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the terms of the deal are already causing frustration within other allied parties - mainly the ones of the right bloc - as they fear that they will take over less important ministries compared to the Blue and White members. Yamina members reportedly expressed their displeasure regarding the upcoming deal, under the fear of being overshadowed by the Blue and White during the portfolio distribution. Netanyahu, on his part, seems willing to force Likud’s members to compromise with less portfolios under their control than in previous governments, probably as a gesture of good will, which could also be perceived by his right allies as them being marginalized in order to favour the Blue and White.<sup>6</sup>

Within the framework of the achieved deal and the unity government’s political future being uncertain, one fact is undeniably discernible: Netanyahu’s political preeminence in Israeli politics and his ability to swerve regardless of the circumstances. In November 2019, the Israeli PM faced various charges that linked him to corruption cases, putting at stake his political future. That way, he offered his political rivals justification to name him a “threat to democracy” and even ask him to resign. Even further, after the September 2019 elections in which Netanyahu lost, many of his rivals, as well as the press, considered that his leadership was coming to an end and raising many doubts about his future, even expressing thoughts of his possible “political end”.<sup>7</sup>

Following the September 2019 elections that Likud lost, Netanyahu successfully prevented the formation of a rival government, maintaining the possibilities to get reelected.<sup>8</sup> This could be considered as a first step of Netanyahu’s strategy, towards undercutting the emergency of any considerable political rival that could endanger his permanence in power.

Between the elections of September and March 2020, Netanyahu found a way to bring together his own party, prove his leadership skills and eliminate any damage done by the previous elections. Likud’s leadership election was declared for December 2019, following the respective decision of the party’s Central Committee. Netanyahu approved of the internal elections, intending to show that he was not afraid of losing the leadership and that the source of Likud’s leadership is democracy within its own supporters. Winning with a notable percentage of 72.5%, Netanyahu sent a powerful message to voters, allies and rivals showing that he was ready to undertake the challenge of the March elections.<sup>9</sup>

After the latest Israeli elections, Netanyahu managed to further undermine any possible political rivals. His deal with Gantz led The Blue and White to disperse and finally dismantle. Netanyahu also assured the absolute loyalty of his allies - the rest of the bloc - which strengthened his position even more, in the race of gaining the majority of Knesset seats. In addition, he once again proved that the base of his supporters is solid and indissoluble.<sup>10</sup>

What is more, Netanyahu always knew how to take the credits of Israel’s relations with foreign states, linking them to his personal relations with their leaders. Most importantly, Netanyahu seems to maintain a strong relationship with Donald Trump, who already congratulated him on the unity deal. Apart from that, Netanyahu claims that he also has a special relationship with the Russian president Vladimir Putin, which averted a possible conflict between the two countries over Syria. The boon of reckoning with the support of such important leaders - or at least its projection - undeniably increases Netanyahu’s trustworthiness and makes him politically attractive for both voters and potential allies.<sup>11</sup>

As for Netanyahu’s charges, his prolonged stay as a PM seems to help him shy away from justice. Since he was accused and persecuted, he had secured immunity due to his caretaker status. Now, by cause of the state of emergency, Netanyahu’s trial has been postponed to late May. It will most likely be a matter of time to witness his next “stay-out-of-jail-card” being used.<sup>12</sup>

The electoral crisis and the unity government, apart from reshaping the dynamics of the Israeli political parties mapping, have also highlighted that the country’s traditional political division mainly between Likud and Labor, right and left, belongs to the past. Today, Israel’s dominant parties and coalitions are comprised of the right and extreme-right, whether they are government or opposition. Those parties and coalitions are ideologically volatile and can make space for political maneuvers, given

the absence of a tight/common ideological background to keep every group united and prohibit cross-moves. This fact was evident during all the phases of the latest Israeli political marathon and the interaction between the participating political entities.

One of the most outstanding similarities among the majority of the Israeli dominant parties is the adopted consensus, regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Palestinian Authority has already expressed the opinion that both Netanyahu and Gantz believe in similar policies regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, with slight differences, like for instance the temporal framework of the plan of the West Bank annexation. In fact, both men had stated that they would proceed with the annexation, with the difference that Netanyahu wants it to happen immediately, while Gantz suggests to wait four to six months. With those facts in mind, we may deduce that the differences between the majority of the political entities in Israel, are more about colors than substance.<sup>13</sup>

Be that as it may, Netanyahu will be the leader of Israel's next government and prolong his tenure as the longest-ever-serving Prime Minister in Israel's history, distancing himself from the court of justice and proving once again that he will not be absent from Israel's political arena, at least for the next years. During those years, he will be required to deal with a reshaping political framework, which might be right-oriented, but could eventually turn out to be dynamically changing, ideologically weak and full of emerging new actors.

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