

**Timo R. Stewart**, Senior Research Fellow, FIIA

## ISRAEL'S 2021 ELECTION

### ANOTHER DEADLOCK IN A VOTE ON IDENTITY, THE ROLE OF RELIGION, AND BIBI

*Israel's two-year government crisis was not conclusively resolved in the 23 March election. Netanyahu has led the country to the right, but the prime minister remains a divisive figure also within the right. The stalemate might give Israeli Arab parties slightly greater heft than before.*

The Likud party of Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister since 2009, suffered setbacks in the 23 March parliamentary election, but remained by far the largest in the 120-seat Knesset. More significant was the failure of Netanyahu’s favoured government coalition to reach the 61 seats needed for a majority. This government would have been built on Likud and four right-wing and religious parties. It is still not impossible for him to succeed in patching together a majority with the help of an additional party, or defectors. However, Netanyahu’s most straightforward route to 61 is blocked, just as it was in the previous election rounds.

Indeed, for many voters, this is all about Netanyahu personally.

The very strong role given to personalities has displaced actual policy content to an astonishing degree in both domestic and foreign policy debate. A significant part of the discussions both before and after the election focused on coalition preferences rather than party platforms or outlined policies. Of course many of the parties have well-established interest groups and ideological ties and there is also a structural reason for a more relational focus. In addition to the Likud (30 seats) and the centrist Yesh Atid (17), the Knesset now has 11 small parties with between 4 and 9 seats each. As a coalition between the larger parties is out of the question, mainly due to reasons linked to Netanyahu personally, majorities

require several small parties, affording them outsized influence. A coalition of six parties seems to be the minimum for forming a majority government now.

Netanyahu’s opponents face an even harder job of cobbling a coalition together, as they do not have much in common beyond their hopes for a new prime minister. Talk of an anti-Netanyahu bloc easily obscures the fact that it is composed of parties ranging from the hard right to the shrunken left. The role of the two parties drawing their support from Israeli Arabs is far from clear. A political impasse or a short-lived compromise government might result in a fifth round of elections sooner or later. This would further exacerbate the political crisis.

Even though the elections have become something akin to a referendum on Netanyahu, greater questions related to identity and the role of religion in society lurk in the background. The frontlines of these issues have remained very stable from one election to the next. The March 2021 election is strongly reminiscent of the elections in April 2019, September 2019 and March 2020, even in spite of the Covid pandemic that broke out in between.

In the elections of 2019–2021, Likud has won at least a quarter of the Knesset mandates (30–35 seats). Another quarter has gone to a collection of small right-wing parties representing the Ultra Orthodox, the religious nationalist and the secular right. Although together with the Likud these parties have won at least half of the total seats, even more in the most recent election cycle, they have their differences, particularly related to the role of religion in society. Netanyahu has been prepared to ally with the Ultra Orthodox, which part of the right is opposed to. This has made it difficult to form a government with a stable majority and has contributed to the recurring rounds of elections.

As for the right-left divide itself, it has over the past decades been associated with views related to the two-state solution: the left has taken a more positive view towards a Palestinian state and been suspicious of West Bank settlements. The right has taken the opposite view. However, the Palestinian issue has hardly featured in the 2019–2021 elections and is clearly not a priority for most voters. If the matter does return to the agenda due to outside pressure, the settlements now have stronger support in the Knesset.

A more topical left-right divide relates to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. The right has emphasised Israel’s Jewish nature, although not necessarily in a strictly religious sense. For example, according to the Nation State Law of 2018, “The State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people”. The left, on the other hand, has emphasised an Israeli identity as something more open and based largely on citizenship, as well as defending the secular nature of the state. This approach has maintained more equal opportunities for Israeli Arabs, just over a fifth of Israeli citizens.

In this sense, the political debate in Israel is like that of many other countries in which ethnicity, identity and nationalism are being discussed. A manifestation of the growing right-wing influence was the entry into the Knesset, with Netanyahu’s support, of the Religious Zionism party, which can be seen as an extreme representation of the ethnonationalist current. One of its Members of Knesset, Itamar Ben-Gvir, is renowned for his admiration of the Kach party, which has been listed as a terrorist organisation in the EU and the United States, and is banned as racist in Israel.

Simultaneously with this shift to the right, the significance of Israeli Arabs has paradoxically increased, as every vote and every Knesset seat is needed more than ever to break the political deadlock. Even Netanyahu campaigned in Arab cities. Both before and after the election, there was speculation particularly about Ra’am, led by Mansour Abbas, joining Netanyahu’s right-wing government, or at least supporting it from the outside. Although this is unlikely to happen, such talk is in itself a sign of change. No Arab party has ever been included in an Israeli government. /