

The 2015 Israeli elections: the non-existent 'right vs left' reality

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Theme

In Israel's current political climate, instead of an ideological split between the 'right' and 'left', the main ideological gaps today are between two types of parties that are willing to sit in on any coalition, either with Likud or Labour or both.

Summary

Since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 there have been no political blocs in Israel. No left and no right, only survival combinations. Therefore, all the talk of the 'size of blocs' only distorted the depressing reality in Israeli politics, wherein the real issues are barely discussed. In the absence of ideological camps or any concrete debate of social, economic or political issues, political individuals, groups and parties are mainly concerned with survival, and with producing effective slogans to mobilise support. In the absence of ideological blocs, no major options to Likud rule can be expected. The new Israeli government is likely to continue expanding settlements in the occupied territories, while pretending to support peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority in order to obtain international legitimacy.

Analysis

Illusionary democracy

In democratic regimes the image is that the citizens' will is expressed by periodic elections, assuming that the imagined 'people' have options to choose from. The Israeli legislative elections of 2015 are apparently proof of this. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided to dissolve the Israeli Parliament (Knesset), calling for new elections. They were held in mid-March. His party, Likud, came first and increased its seats in the Knesset by 50%, from 20 to 30 (out of 120), after the split of Yisrael Beiteinu.¹ The coalition formed by the Labour Party and 'the Movement' – called the Zionist Camp– which was openly supported by most of the media, apparently lost the elections, with only 24 seats.²

¹ Meaning 'Israel is our Home'. This is the party led by the former Foreign Affairs Minister Avigdor Lieberman, a party supported mainly by migrants from the former USSR. In the 2013 elections, Yisrael Beiteinu and Likud formed a joint list that obtained 31 seats (20 Likud and 11 Yisrael Beiteinu).

² In the 2013 elections they separately gained 21 seats: 15 for the Labour Party and six for the Movement. The latter is a centre party bringing together people from Ariel Sharon's former party Kadima (Tzipi Livni and Meir Shitrit) and from the Labour Party (Amir Peretz and Amram Mitzna).

I will argue here that democracy in Israel is not only imagined, like most democracies, but illusory: the 'people' is deeply divided along ethnic, religious and national lines, and the political parties are unable to build alternative coalitions to those led by Likud. Netanyahu understood this politically-constructed reality, so his call for elections was not only effective but also took no real risks of losing his rule. However, although Netanyahu won the elections, he could not control the dynamics of the electoral campaign, leading him to form the most extreme right-wing cabinet, despite the fact that he would have probably preferred a centre-right coalition with the Zionist Camp and other 'centre parties', as he did in 2009 and 2013. Such a coalition could have been more stable and more legitimate in the international arena. In certain conjunctures of crisis we can expect the dissolution of the present coalition and the formation of a broader coalition even without elections, based on 2015's electoral results.

The question here is why Netanyahu did not even try to form a centre-right coalition in 2015, as he did in 2009 and 2013. Immediately after the elections, Netanyahu was trapped by the 'right-left' polarisation and enmity used to mobilise support during the electoral campaign and the euphoria of the apparent victory of the 'right'. It was an 'apparent' victory because there was no real option between two ideological camps, and also because what can be called the 'extreme right' was weakened.³ The polarised discourse of 'right vs left' is very effective to mobilise support for Likud, due to the 'danger' of a 'leftist' coalition,⁴ despite the fact that there is no real 'left option' in the present construction of Israeli politics.

Since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 there have been no political blocs in Israel. No left and no right, only survival combinations. Therefore, all the talk of the 'size of blocs' only distorted the depressing reality in Israeli politics, wherein the real issues are barely discussed. In the absence of ideological camps or concrete debates on social, economic and political issues, political individuals, groups and parties are mainly concerned with survival and with producing effective slogans to mobilise support.

The reason there have been no blocs since 1995 is simple: the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin was an attack on the very existence of a 'left-wing bloc' consisting of Labour, Meretz and the Arab parties. The message was well understood, and no such cooperation exists any longer. Since the assassination, all the Jewish parties – 'left' and 'right' – have had little problem sitting alongside one another in a coalition and excluding the parties representing Arab citizens. The 'extreme leftist' Meretz sat with the 'extreme rightist' National Religious Party in 1999; other coalitions included centre parties like Shinui (and its heirs Yesh Atid),⁵ Kadima⁶ and Labour sitting with

³ The extreme national-religious party shrunk from 12 to eight Knesset members, and the extreme right of the Shas ultra-orthodox party led by Eli Yishai failed to gain the minimum 3.5% of the vote and thus disappeared.

⁴ See Netanyahu's desperate call to his voters due to the mass Arab vote: <http://www.nytimes.com/live/israel-elections-vote-results/in-video-netanyahu-tells-backers-that-arab-turnout-endangers-his-rule/>.

⁵ Shinui (Change) was a secular centre party established in 1999 by the journalist Tommy Lapid and was part of Sharon's coalition in 2003, with 15 Knesset members, and disappeared in the 2006 elections. In 2013, his son, Yair

Likud, and the extreme right wing the Bayt Yehudi.⁷ Labour not only sat alongside Likud in Ariel Sharon's governments (in 2001 and in 2004) but also under Netanyahu's government in 2009.

The truth is that the twin leaders of the Zionist Camp –Livni and Herzog– sat in Netanyahu's government until they were kicked out: Herzog was ousted by Ehud Barak's split from Labour in the 2013 elections and Livni was ejected by Netanyahu himself in the latest elections. Instead of an ideological split between the 'right' and the 'Left', the main ideological gaps today are between two types of parties that are willing to sit in any coalition, either with Likud, Labour or both. The gap is between the ultra-Orthodox parties Shas and Agudat Israel⁸ and the ultra-secular party Yesh Atid.⁹

Ideological blocs and their termination

In the past, there were 'right and left' blocs that generated the biggest changes in Israeli politics. Thus, Likud took power in 1977 facilitated by the 61 members of the Knesset right-wing bloc, and Labour's victory in 1992 was facilitated by the 61 Knesset members of the left bloc mentioned above. Likud and Labour continue speaking of blocs to this day in order to preserve their status as a 'ruling cartel' – namely the only two parties whose leaders are legitimate candidates to become Prime Minister–. This 'cartelist' political construction of reality still succeeds in preserving Likud and Labour in powerful positions, despite the fact that the two have been downgraded to 'third party' status in recent years (in 2006, when Likud gained 12 Knesset seats, and in 2009 and 2013, when Labour gained 13 and 15 seats, respectively).

However, in the absence of ideological blocs, no major options to Likud rule can be expected. Rather, we could expect new 'survival combinations' under Likud (Netanyahu) leadership. Instead of bringing about changes in foreign or domestic policy, any new government is expected to continue expanding Israeli settlements in the occupied territories while pretending to support peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority in order to gain international legitimacy. The Israeli public is aware that using the 'peace masquerade' is necessary for external consumption but also knows that most Israelis and Palestinians do not really believe in a two-state solution after 15 years of violent confrontation.

Significant changes could take place only in the wake of serious ideological shifts that define a shared political identity of a bloc. In 1977 that was facilitated by the ideological shift of the National Religious Party, which was transformed from an

Lapid, established Yesh Atid ('There is future') claiming they represent the secular middle class demands raised in the 2011 protest movement. It obtained 19 Knesset members and was a leading partner in Netanyahu's coalition.

⁶ The party was established by Sharon as a split from Likud, together with Shimon Peres' split from Labour. Kadima gained 29 seats in 2006 and formed a coalition government with Labour. It obtained 28 seats in 2009 but refused to enter Netanyahu's coalition government. They split in 2013, one small party gained two seats in the Knesset and Livni's movement obtained six members.

⁷ Meaning 'the Jewish Home'. They are a renovated manifestation of the former National Religious Party.

⁸ They jointly obtained 13 Knesset members in the 2015 elections.

⁹ Its power shrank from 19 Knesset members in 2013 to 11 in 2015.

historical ally of the Labour party to a supporter of the Likud's 'entire Land of Israel' ideology. The new 'right bloc' included 61 Knesset members from Likud, NRP and the ultra-Orthodox parties. As a result of their responsibility for the future of the state, Likud became more moderate and was ready to return the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt and to grant autonomy to the Palestinians immediately after the 'nationalist-right' turnabout in 1977.

In 1992 it was Yitzhak Rabin and his Labour Party who underwent a radical ideological turnabout towards negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). For the first time, Labour got the power to form a 61 Knesset-member political bloc, not only with Meretz but also with the two parties that were delegitimised until then due to their anti-Zionist ideology and Arab electorate (usually called the 'Arab parties'): Hadash and the Arab Democratic Party. Although the latter two parties were not invited to participate in the government they signed agreements promising to give their support. Rabin's government had the political support to recognise the PLO and negotiate the Oslo Agreements, but he was constantly delegitimised due to his 'Arab' supporters. In both cases, 1977 and 1992, there were political turnabouts because there were clear ideological blocs that enabled major changes in foreign policy, in signing peace agreements and also in implementing fundamental changes in Israel's economy.

So why did Rabin's assassination terminate the 'left and right' political blocs? The three bullets that killed Rabin immediately closed the political space of Israel's Arab citizens. Rabin brought them in and his assassination pushed them out. Without the Arab citizens there is no 'left-wing bloc' and no need for its opposing 'right-wing bloc'. Rabin's public lynching, that preceded his actual killing, targeted him for relying on Arab votes to advance his policies. The main instigator was the leader of the main opposition party: Benjamin Netanyahu. Rabin's detractors claimed that without the support of a Jewish majority he would not have a mandate to concede parts of Greater Israel. Rabin rejected these criticisms as racism. Indeed, in order to legitimise his murder, Rabin's detractors portrayed him dressed in a *keffiyeh*. In other words, Rabin's murder was a racist attack.

Since then, the racist discourse has permeated the entire Israeli political arena, not only among the 'right', but also in the so-called 'left' and 'centre'. All of them have adopted the worldview that it is illegitimate to make concessions over the Land of Israel by relying on the political support of the 'Arabs'. This political attitude is very similar to the national-religious claim that the Land of Israel belongs to the people of Israel, hence only the Jews have the right to decide who will rule it and if it can be partitioned or not. The practical meaning is the automatic extraction of 10% of Knesset members (and 20% of the citizens) from legitimate political participation and from potential coalitions. This is the reason why we should not be surprised when, time after time, there is no 'left bloc' and no need for an opposed 'right-wing bloc'. The varied composition of coalitions since Rabin's assassination proves that there is no political continuity and that all Zionist (Jewish) parties can be part of

them. Both partners of the *cartel*, Likud and Labour, use the left-right polarised discourse in order to mobilise the ‘tribal hostility’ between the social groups supporting them. However, Likud has more to gain, but Labour is more successful when the left-right ‘tribal mobilisation’ is weakened by socio-economic agendas, as in the 1999 and 2006 elections.

Wrong electoral expectations

When the Israelis headed to the polls on 17 March it was a serious mistake to expect a political turnabout, but many did have illusions due to a very distorted coverage of the electoral campaign by most of the independent media, which were hostile to Netanyahu (except Sheldon Adelson’s Yisrael Hayom). After the elections there were many expressions of surprise and disappointment, with a strong feeling that the ‘right wing’ won the elections, a feeling that pushed Netanyahu to establish an extremist coalition that he will probably regret. However, both Likud and Labour were prevented from cooperating immediately after the elections, as they did in 2009-13, due to the hostile campaign and the political construction of the ‘right-wing’ success.

As a matter of fact, the ‘objective’ data show the opposite: The political power of the parties rejecting a compromise with the Palestinians was reduced (from 43 to 38) due to the new centre-party of Likud splinter Kahlon and his new Kulanu (with 10 Knesset members) and due to the split of Lieberman and his open rejection of Great Israel ideology. However, in politics what matters are not ‘objective’ facts but their public interpretation, what I have termed elsewhere¹⁰ the political construction of reality. Given the left-right discourse, political analysts spent most of their time speculating before the elections over the different combinations that would make political survival possible for Netanyahu and Herzog. They asked whether Likud would have enough power to build a ‘right-wing’ coalition, with Jewish Home, Lieberman’s party, the ultra-Orthodox parties and Kulanu, or if Herzog would have enough power to build a ‘centre-left’ coalition with the ultra-Orthodox, Yesh Atid, Kulanu and Meretz. The ‘Arab list’ was not counted for this effect. Their exclusion was taken for granted.

The 2015 election results¹¹ shows that the speculative ‘right-wing’ coalition could be supported by 67 Knesset members, and 53 in opposition, while the speculative ‘centre-left’ coalition could get 69 members with only 38 members in the right-wing opposition and the 13 Arab list members with a more neutral or positive attitude. In fact, the government established by Netanyahu has only 61 Knesset members due to Lieberman’s decision to join the opposition, meaning that instability and the constant seeking of optional coalitions would be the main feature of the coming years’ politics. However, what must be clear is not only that the right-wing coalition might be weak and unstable, but most importantly that that the centre-left coalition is

¹⁰ L.L. Grinberg (2010), *Politics and Violence in Israel/Palestine – Democracy vs Military Rule*, Routledge, London.

¹¹ Likud 30, the Zionist Camp 24, The Joint Arab List 13, Yesh Atid 11, Kulanu 10, Bayt Yehudi eight, Shas seven, Tora Judaism six, Yisrael Beiteinu six and Meretz five.

not (and never was) a real option.

The problem lies not in the 'right' or the 'left' but in the 'centre', namely the parties that are ready in principle to be part of coalitions led by Likud or Labour. The main split is between the ultra-secular Yesh Atid and the ultra-Orthodox Shas and Tora Judaism. The tension between the Ashkenazi secular parties and the ultra-Orthodox parties has divided Israeli politics since the failed attempt to form a Labour-ultra-Orthodox coalition by Shimon Peres in 1990 (the so called 'dirty trick'). It was the main tension in Rabin's and Netanyahu's coalitions in the 1990s, and it brought down Ehud Barak's government in 2000 within a year. The tension led Likud to kick out the ultra-Orthodox parties whenever they cooperated with the Lapid family in 2003 and 2013.¹² In the absence of political or economic agendas, the 'tribal hostility' between the ultra-seculars and the ultra-Orthodox is used to mobilise the electorate. Also, the left-right 'tribal polarised mobilisation' includes in its sub-text the secular vs Orthodox hostile agenda. Can Yitzhak Herzog establish a 'centre-left' coalition with the ultra-Orthodox parties and the ultra-seculars Meretz and Yesh Atid? This could be the only alternative to Netanyahu's coalition within the newly elected Parliament, but it is not at all realistic. Despite the fact that both Yesh Atid and the ultra-Orthodox parties were ready to be part of a Likud or Labour coalition, they are not ready to cooperate and participate in the same coalition.

Conclusion

The government established by Netanyahu following the 2015 Israeli legislative elections has only 61 Knesset members (out of 120). This means that instability and the constant search for optional coalitions will be the main feature over the coming years. However, what must be clear is not only that the right-wing coalition might be weak and unstable, but most importantly that the centre-left coalition is not (and never was) a real option. Obviously, this could change if Rabin's 'trend-breaking' step were to be followed, bringing in the Joint Arab List (13 Knesset members), either instead of Yesh Atid or the ultra-Orthodox. But such a step is very difficult to imagine at present. Indeed, the step could provoke a real political turnabout in social, economic and political terms. But in order for this to happen, a Knesset majority is not enough. Leadership and a new vision for the future of Israel are needed, both of which were severely lacking in the 2015 elections.



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¹² I refer here to Lapid père's Shinui party in 2003 and to his son, who gained 19 seats in 2013 with a similar anti-Orthodox platform.