

Netanyahu's Election Scapegoat: Israel's Palestinian Minority

Part 2: Early Move to Election Designed to Strengthen Right's Hand by Accentuating Internal Threats and Casting the Vote as One for Israel's Soul

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The collapse of Binyamin Netanyahu's less than two-year-old government this week indicates the increasingly volatile nature of Israeli politics - and a trend towards ever greater extremism. Those who will pay the highest price are almost certainly Israel's large minority of Palestinian citizens.

The changes are a direct result of a strengthening consensus among the Jewish public over the past five years that no resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is possible.

Few Israeli politicians ever took seriously the idea of reaching a meaningful peace agreement with the Palestinians, but for much of the past quarter century they did at least claim in public to be striving for one. There is now no public pressure on them even to pay lip service to a peace agenda.

That has forced the whole political discourse in Israel to lurch rightwards, with Israeli politicians fighting over ever narrower ideological ground for votes. It has made Israel's fragmented, coalition governments even more susceptible to internal feuding and paralysis.

It has also encouraged politicians to consider more closely the narrow sectoral interests of their voters. The strong divisions in Israeli Jewish society have come ever more to the fore: between the religious and secular, the settlers and "moderates", European and Middle Eastern Jews, the so-called veterans and more recent immigrants like the Russian-speakers, as well as between those who serve in the army and those like the ultra-Orthodox who don't.

This kind of inward-looking politics, stripped of the distractions of a peace process, is intensely fractious by its nature.

Over the next three months, the centre-left and centre-right parties are most likely to concentrate on domestic issues, arguing that it is time to loosen the stultifying grip of a handful of tycoons. They will hope that there is still a large, silent constituency of disgruntled voters in overcrowded central Israel who launched the social protests of 2011.

The centre-left may gesture towards a renewal of peace talks, but chiefly as a way to buy quiet from the Palestinians, improve Israel's international image, and free up resources for "Israel proper" rather than the settlements.

Chauvinist Legislation

The right, on the other hand, has indicated that it is taking a different tack.

It needs a credible enemy, one that can be feared and that keeps the Jewish tribe from feuding too viciously. The occasional rocket from Gaza hardly qualifies.

The role is instead being assigned to Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, the native population who avoided expulsion in 1948 and their descendants, who together now comprise a fifth of Israel's population. It also encompasses a further 300,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem who have what Israel terms "residency rights".

The process of demonisation began with Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu party's campaign slogan "No citizenship without loyalty" launched in time for the 2009 election. Now Netanyahu is openly adopting the same discourse.

According to Mohammed Zeidan, director of the Nazareth-based Human Rights Association, Israel's 1.5 million Palestinian citizens are now likely to take centre stage in the election campaign.

Netanyahu has been preparing for the government's downfall for the past few months, waiting for the right moment to launch his re-election bid. The background noise of regular attacks by Palestinians, most of them in Jerusalem, has offered him the chance to play the right's trump card: security.

That is why recent weeks have been marked by an almost endless parade of chauvinist legislative proposals, extreme even by his government's standards. Measures have included revoking citizenship and residency, summarily demolishing homes, and imposing long jail terms on stone-throwers.

It has also culminated in Netanyahu's recent decision to push aggressively the Jewish nation-state bill, legislation that simply consolidates the discrimination against non-Jews inherent in Israel's existing legal structures.

Despite the bill's minor legal impact, however, it does usefully create a political climate for the election campaign. In Netanyahu's script, the struggle is now for Israel's soul. It pits a patriotic, ultra-nationalist camp against a centre and left ready to appease an "Arab" enemy determined to subvert the Jewish state.

Challengers to Crown

In a speech on Tuesday explaining his decision to fire two centrist ministers in the government, Netanyahu warned that Israel needed "a strong prime minister from the national camp", one with "a large ruling party".

But while Netanyahu hopes to occupy the extreme right's ideological terrain, his two main challengers for that crown - Lieberman and Naftali Bennett, both senior ministers in his government - have also been busy updating their own versions of an anti-Arab campaign.

Interestingly, each has tried to dress it up as a "peace plan", presumably in the hope of giving themselves a veneer of seriousness in Washington and European capitals

exasperated by Netanyahu's intransigence, while selling their schemes at home more as pacification plans.

Bennett, the leader of the settlers' Jewish Home party, recently used the platform of the New York Times to set out his scheme to formally ditch the peace process, annex most of the West Bank while leaving small islands of territory as a demilitarised semi-autonomous area for a compliant Palestinian leadership.

Meanwhile, Lieberman has unveiled yet another iteration of his plan to create a demilitarised, weak Palestinian state that requires expelling many Palestinian citizens from Israel. This time he proposes not only redrawing the borders to remove Palestinian citizens but also using economic bribes to persuade Palestinians to leave their historic cities in Israel, such as Acre and Jaffa.

Netanyahu believes - and most polls seem to corroborate this - that the right, backed by the Jewish religious fundamentalist parties of the ultra-Orthodox, will win a convincing majority of seats.

Crisis for Arab Parties

The right's opponents are, in any case, likely to be fatally split. The centre is closer on the Palestinian issue to the right than the tiny Jewish left, and both in turn will find it hard to make common ground with the parties representing Israel's Palestinian minority.

A further question mark hangs over the future of the small non-Zionist parties in the 120-seat parliament, or Knesset. There are currently two Palestinian parties - a largely Islamic one and a more nationalist one - as well as a joint Jewish-Arab communist faction.

The parliament raised the electoral threshold from 2 to 3.25 per cent earlier this year with the barely concealed intention of blocking these three parties' entry to the Knesset. Their best hope for survival is to create a unified list, but strong ideological differences have been making an agreement difficult. The move towards elections has now put them under pressure to act.

Amal Jamal, a politics professor at Tel Aviv University, observed that the rapid decline in turn-out among the Palestinian minority in recent elections was an additional factor for the parties to consider. "A unified list would probably encourage some of these non-voters to turn out again."

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