

Why Israel Is Struggling to Find a Way Out of Its Political Deadlock

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Global Research, October 03, 2019

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It would be a grave mistake to assume that the continuing political deadlock in Israel – with neither incumbent prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor his main rival Benny Gantz seemingly able to cobble together a coalition government – is evidence of a deep ideological divide.

In political terms, there is nothing divided about Israel. In this month's general election, 90 per cent of Israeli Jews voted for parties that identify as being either on the militaristic, anti-Arab right or on the religious, anti-Arab far-right.

The two parties claiming to represent the centre-left – the rebranded versions of Labour and Meretz – won only 11 seats in the 120-member parliament.

Stranger still, the three parties that say they want to form a "broad unity government" won about 60 per cent of the vote.

Netanyahu's Likud, Gantz's Blue and White party led by former generals, and ex-defence minister Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu secured between them 73 seats – well over the 61 seats needed for a majority.

All three support the entrenchment of the occupation and annexation of parts of the West Bank; all three think the settlements are justified and necessary; all demand that the siege of Gaza continue; all view the Palestinian leadership as untrustworthy; and all want neighbouring Arab states cowering in fear.

Moshe Yaalon, Gantz's fellow general in the Blue and White party, was formerly a pivotal figure in Likud alongside Netanyahu. And Lieberman, before he created his own party, was the director of Netanyahu's office. These are not political enemies; they are ideological bedfellows.

There is one significant but hardly insurmountable difference. Gantz thinks it is important to maintain bipartisan US support for Israel's belligerent occupation while Netanyahu has preferred to throw Israel's hand in with Donald Trump and the Christian religious right.



Reuven Rivlin, Israel's president, has pressed the three parties to work together. He has suggested that Netanyahu and Gantz rotate the role of prime minister between them, a mechanism used in Israel's past.

But after Gantz refused last week, the president assigned Netanyahu the task of trying to form a government, although most observers think the effort will prove futile. After indecisive elections in April and September, Israel therefore looks to be heading for a third round of elections.

But if the deadlock is not ideological, what is causing it?

In truth, the paralysis has been caused by two fears - one in Likud, the other in Blue and White.

Gantz is happy to sit in a unity government with the Likud party. His objection is to allying with Netanyahu, whose lawyers this week began hearings with the attorney general on multiple counts of fraud and breach of trust. Netanyahu wants to be in power to force through a law guaranteeing himself immunity from prosecution.

Blue and White was created to oust Netanyahu on the basis that he is corrupt and actively destroying what is left of Israel's democratic institutions, including by trying to vilify state prosecutors investigating him.

For Blue and White to now prop Netanyahu up in a unity government would be a betrayal of its voters.

The solution for Likud, then, should be obvious: remove Netanyahu and share power with Blue and White.

But the problem is that Likud's members are in absolute thrall to their leader. The thought of losing him terrifies them. Likud now looks more like a one-man cult than a political party.

Gantz, meanwhile, is gripped by fear of a different kind.

Without Likud, the only solution for Gantz is to turn elsewhere for support. But that would make him reliant on the 13 seats of the Joint List, a coalition of parties representing Israel's large minority of Palestinian citizens.

And there's the rub. Blue and White is a deeply Arab-phobic party, just like Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu. Its only civilian leader, Yair Lapid, notoriously refused to work with Palestinian

parties after the 2013 election – before Netanyahu had made racist incitement his campaign trademark.

Lapid said: “I’ll never sit with the Zoabis” – a reference to the most prominent of the Palestinian legislators at the time, Haneen Zoabi.

Similarly, Gantz has repeatedly stressed his opposition to sitting with the Joint List.

Nonetheless, the Joint List’s leader Ayman Odeh made an unprecedented gesture last week, throwing the weight of most of his faction behind Gantz.

That was no easy concession, given Gantz’s positions and his role as army chief in 2014 overseeing the destruction of Gaza. The move angered many Palestinians in the occupied territories.

But Odeh saw the Palestinian minority’s turn-out in September leap by 10 percentage points compared to April’s election, so desperate were his voters to see the back of Netanyahu.

Surveys also indicate a growing frustration among Palestinian citizens at their lack of political influence. Although peace talks are off Israel’s agenda, some in the minority hope it might be possible to win a little relief for their communities after decades of harsh, institutional discrimination.

In a New York Times op-ed last week, Odeh justified his support for Gantz. It was intended to send “a clear message that the only future for this country is a shared future, and there is no shared future without the full and equal participation of Arab Palestinian citizens”.

Gantz seems unimpressed. According to an investigation by the Israeli media, Netanyahu only got first crack at forming a government because Gantz blanched at the prospect.

He was worried Netanyahu would again smear him – and damage him in the eyes of voters – if he was seen to be negotiating with the Joint List.

Netanyahu has already painted the alternatives in stark terms: either a unity government with him at its heart, or a Blue and White government backed by those who “praise terrorists”.

The Likud leader might yet pull a rabbit out of his battered hat. Gantz or Lieberman could cave, faced with taunts that otherwise “the Arabs” will get a foot in the door. Or Netanyahu could trigger a national emergency, even a war, to bully his rivals into backing him.

But should it come to a third election, Netanyahu will have a pressing reason to ensure he succeeds this time. And that will doubtless require stepping up incitement another dangerous gear against the Palestinian minority.

The reality is that there is strong unity in Israel – over shared, deeply ugly attitudes towards Palestinians, whether citizens or those under occupation. Paradoxically, the only obstacle to realising that unity is Netanyahu’s efforts to cling to power.

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A version of this article first appeared in the National, Abu Dhabi.

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