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The New Israeli Government: Background and Prospects

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Emerging from tortuous negotiations, the Israeli opposition managed to form an eight-party coalition government under the rotating premiership of Yamina's Naftali Bennett (two initial years) and Yesh Atid's leader, Yair Lapid, ending Netanyahu's 12-year rule.

Background

With the results of the March 2021 Knesset elections tallied, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin tasked incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with forming a government, after his Likud party singly won the greatest majority of 30 out of 120 Knesset seats. Netanyahu tried to form a coalition government from his right-wing big tent of 52 MKs, along with Yamina's 7 and the United Arab List's (Ra'am) 4. While Yamina and the Southern Islamic Movement were amenable to joining Netanyahu's proposed coalition government, the Netanyahu camp-affiliated fascist Religious Zionism Party's seven members refused to participate in a coalition dependent on an Arab list's support. Netanyahu sought to pressure the Religious Zionism Party's leadership through arranging a meeting of Ra'am leader Mansour Abbas with the godfather of Jewish settlement in the occupied Arab territories, Rabbi Druckmann, to encourage him to join a government coalition with Ra'am participation headed up by Netanyahu - or at least to support such a thing from what he could consider to be a safe distance, outside the coalition. Druckmann stood fast reiterating support of the Religious Zionism Party leadership's repudiation of any Arab-supported coalition government.

Following Netanyahu's failure to form a government, the task of forming a government fell to Yair Lapid and his second largest parliamentary Yesh Atid party, enjoying the occupation of 17 Knesset seats. Seeking to thwart his former ally Lapid, Netanyahu intensified Israeli attacks targeting occupied East Jerusalem, especially in Al-Aqsa and the landmark Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. The predictably ensuing rockets launched into Israel by Hamas in solidarity with Al-Aqsa caused only a little damage which the Israeli military could easily have quietly ignored, or - not inconceivably - crafted a proportionately measured response to. Netanyahu chose instead to launch an all-out bombardment of the Gaza Strip lasting eleven days.

Netanyahu then launched a simultaneous campaign of incitement against Naftali Bennett and Yamina, Bennett's party (that had after all garnered only seven seats), as well as against the opposition entire camp. On a roll, Netanyahu "rallied his troops" and assorted rabbinic leaders of the Religious Zionist Movement to arm twist Bennett and Yamina MKs, along with Gideon Sa'ar's Likud offshoot, New Hope, to block the formation of any alternative government. Rabbi Druckmann conducted Ultra-Orthodox rabbis in a resounding chorus of "everything must be done" to prevent the formation of government coalition alternatives to a Netanyahu regime. The fever pitch of provocation and incitement prompted Internal Intelligence (Shin Bet) head Nadav Argaman to warn of a possible replay of the political assassinations of 1995, which saw a Jewish extremist assassinate Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.



The New Government Cabinet in the Headlines and Headlights

The Bennett-Lapid government ended Netanyahu's 12-year rule by winning the Knesset's vote of confidence on 13 June, by a whisker: 60 Knesset members supporting, 59 voting against, and one abstaining. The government thus conceived ranks as the third largest in Israel's history with 27 ministers and six deputy ministers, all rubbing shoulders within eight politically and ideologically heterogeneous parties spanning extreme right (three parties), right (two parties) and Zionist left (two parties), with a bonus Arab party, to boot. The parties are: Yamina, headed by Naftali Bennett, Prime Minister and Minister of Settlement, with three ministers (six MKs, after one left in protest of Bennett forming a government with the anti-Netanyahu camp); Yesh Atid headed by Yair Lapid, the alternative prime minister and foreign minister with seven ministers (17 MKs); the Blue and White party led by Defense Minister Benny Gantz, with four ministers (8 MKs); Labour headed by Morav Michaeli, Minister of Transportation, with three ministers (7 MKs), the Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman with three ministers (originally with seven MKs, one of whom abandoned the party after having not been appointed a minister, leaving it with just 6); New Hope headed by Gideon Sa'ar, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Judiciary with four ministers (6 MKs); Meretz headed by Nitzan Horowitz, the Minister of Health with three ministers (6 MKs); and, last but certainly not least, Ra'am, led by Mansour Abbas (4 MKs) with a deputy minister, as per the coalition agreement with Yesh Atid.

The coalition agreement between Lapid and Bennett stipulated that the government consists of two blocs, the first is Yamina's, which includes New Hope and the second is the Yesh Atid bloc, which includes the Blue and White, Labor, Yisrael Beiteinu, and Meretz parties. It was agreed that ministers of each of these two blocs could prevent any decision in the government if there were consensus among the ministers of the bloc seeking to counter the government's decision. This empowered the two parties, Yamina and New Hope, represented by only seven ministers in the government, since they could then effectively block any decision in the government they disagreed with. As for the composition of the political-security cabinet, it was decided that it would consist of 12 ministers equally between the two blocs, such that Yamina and New Hope would have six ministers in the political-security cabinet, while the remaining five parties would have six ministers.⁽¹⁾ Effectively then, extreme right-wing parties with only 12 representatives set extreme pre-conditions for anyone joining an anti-Netanyahu coalition, and he rewarded them for this. For the right, this accords it power to obstruct government decisions that it does not like. That said, these parties then risk appearing in the eyes of most of the Israeli right as traitors to the party secretariat, for having allied themselves with Arabs and leftists in a barter for government posts and status, and to fulfill Bennett's clearly undeserved dream of becoming prime minister – given that his party won a measly 7 seats in parliamentary elections.

¹ The political-security cabinet consists of Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid, Avigdor Lieberman, Benny Gantz, Omer Bar-Lev, Ze'ev Elkin, Nitzan Horowitz, Yifat Shasha Biton, Gideon Sa'ar, Ayelet Shaked, Matan Kahana, and Merav Michaeli.



It is clear from the government's program outline and coalition agreements that economic and social issues and other internal issues in Israeli society receive priority attention in the government's program: the Israeli economy is still suffering from economic crisis worsened, if not entirely caused by, the covid-19 pandemic. The program headings also attached importance to the *character* of the state. It affirmed that the government would work to strengthen the foundations of Israel as *a Jewish and democratic state*, that it would strengthen the unity of the Jewish people in the world, encourage Jewish immigration to Israel, and increase mutual understanding between Israel and the Jews of the world.

The broad outlines of the government coalition also confirmed that the Israeli government will continue with the Judaization of Jerusalem, to ensure the "growth and prosperity of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, and its construction as a dynamic, renewable metropolis," a slogan which - quite possibly - translates into "promoting Jewish settlement in occupied East Jerusalem". All ministries and national agencies are accordingly to move to Jerusalem at the earliest opportunity, as per the program, to enhance the city's symbolic position and status as the base foundation of governance. According to the coalition agreement, the government will provide additional financial support to the budget of Ariel University in the fourth largest Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank. In his speech to the Knesset to gain the vote of confidence in his government, Naftali Bennett emphasized that his government will continue to build and promote Jewish settlements *throughout* the land of Palestine.

The government agenda and partisan coalition agreements made no reference at all to the Palestinian issue. However, one of the clauses in the coalition agreement affirmed the need to uphold Israeli interests in Area C of the occupied West Bank. To achieve this, the Israeli government will strengthen the Ministry of Security's Civil Administration through job creation and capacity building programs aimed principally at ensuring Palestinians refrain from construction activity in the area and so establishing a presence on these (their) lands. In this respect, this new government may therefore prove to be *worse* than the previous one, as it aims to perpetuate the dispossession of the Palestinian Authority of any significant power in all of West Bank (Area C), and expand Jewish settlement there.

Challenges facing the Government

The eight parties that make up the government coalition face the major challenge of preserving, for as long as possible, a government whose parties are immersed in contradictions and political/ideological differences: namely, parties from the far right to the far left of Zionism, with Ra'am added into the mix. Three of these include the extreme Zionist right (Yamina, New Hope and Yisrael Beiteinu) with leaders who were on the extreme right wing of the Likud party, and then split from it over personal differences with Netanyahu rather than any political or ideological dispute. These three parties stand firmly against national rights of the Palestinian people and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the Palestinian territories Israel occupied in 1967. They support the continuation and promotion of Jewish settlement throughout the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem and



call for the annexation to Israel of large blocs of real estate in both areas. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, now the country's first Religious Zionist Movement prime minister, who previously served as Secretary-General of the Council of Jewish Settlements in the occupied West Bank, is among the most hostile of Israeli leaders to the Palestinian people, most intent on belittling their rights, and most persistent in calling for Israel's annexation of "Area C," an area that includes about 62 percent of the occupied West Bank.

It is true that these parties, after great efforts, were able to agree on the broad lines of the government coalition, but these agreed common denominators have clearly avoided addressing the real areas of disagreement that the government will certainly face on the ground. Perhaps the largest portion of the challenges and problems that the new government will face relate to the Palestinian issue, totally ignored by the government's outlines. This includes the sharp contradictions between the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian people, especially about the continued ethnic cleansing in occupied East Jerusalem and the increasing incursions of settlers into Al-Aqsa Mosque, reaching a peak during events of recent months.

The Bennett government faces many urgent issues which it must take decisions on: expelling Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, when a decision may be issued to that effect by the Israeli court in the coming weeks; increasing the frequency of settler incursions on Al-Aqsa Mosque; the fate of recently established settlement outposts in the heart of the occupied West Bank; the legal status of settlement outposts scattered across the occupied West Bank; and a stand on Hamas and the Gaza Strip (to continue or change the policy that Netanyahu followed in the last decade). Can Ra'am, or Meretz, remain part of the government coalition and bear full legal and political responsibility for the government's actions and crimes? What would their response be if a government, for example, evicted Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah and increased settlers' incursions into Al-Aqsa to pray in preparation for its complete Judaization? And whether the government should or should not eliminate the illegal outpost designated as such according to Israeli law, which was erected several days ago in the heart of the occupied West Bank?

Netanyahu will continue to lead the Likud party and mount opposition to the new government to bring it down as soon as possible and return once again to power - as he did on the two previous occasions when he lost power. It seems that Netanyahu remains popular, despite being tried in three corruption cases, and will insist leading the Likud party and the opposition. It is likely that he would defeat any challenger from within the Likud party if one of its leaders should challenge him for the leadership of the party. Netanyahu, through Likud and through his strong relations with the leaders of the settler far right and the fascist right, will likely raise any problems he can confronting the government, including organizing protests and demonstrations, intensifying the invasions of Al-Aqsa and carrying out other provocative activities to delegitimize the government and encourage disputes between its components, with the aim of bringing it down.



Conclusion

Anyone examining the headlines and blueprints of the new government and its personalities might see it as a government of right and extreme right, masked with the Zionist left and southern Islamic movement. The fate of this government, formed mainly to topple Netanyahu, depends on the cohesion of its partisan components and its ability to resolve the turbulent contradictions raging among them, as well as on the extent to which both Ra'am and Meretz are willing to continue to support the government when it embarks on aggressive policies against the Palestinian people, whether in Jerusalem, or in the West Bank and Gaza. In any case, it seems that this government, while resting upon a fragile majority in the Knesset, will be unable to continue in its current form for long, especially considering Netanyahu's dogged leadership of the opposition.