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# The 24th Knesset Elections: Will Israel Form a Stable Government This Time?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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## Unit for Political Studies

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For the fourth time in less than two years, on 23 March, Israeli voters headed to the polls for the Knesset elections. Despite securing a large majority, the far-right camp led by Benjamin Netanyahu failed for the fourth time to obtain a majority great enough to enable it to form a government. Netanyahu's camp, which, along with Likud, includes the eastern Haredi party, Shas, the Western Haredi party, United Torah Judaism, and the fascist Religious Zionist Party won 52 seats in the Knesset, while the alliance opposed to Netanyahu won 57. These include Yesh Atid-Telem led by Yair Lapid, the Blue and White party led by Benny Gantz, Labor led by Merav Michaeli, Yisrael Beiteinu led by Avigdor Lieberman, the New Hope party led by Gideon Sa'ar, Meretz, and the Arab Joint List. The extreme right Yamina party led by Naftali Bennett, which won 7 seats, and the United Arab List (Southern Islamic Movement) led by Mansour Abbas, which won 4 seats are yet to pick a side. Yamina announced during its election campaign that it is not in Netanyahu's camp and that its leader, Naftali Bennett, is competing for the premiership, with its decision to support either camp pending negotiations it will hold with the various parties. The Southern Islamic Movement, which split from the Arab Joint List ahead of these elections, also announced that it has not ruled out an alliance with any of the two camps, with its position also awaiting negotiations.

## Key Election Features

These elections were characterized by some basic features, most notably:

1. The personality of Netanyahu, who stands accused in three corruption cases, was a major issue in these elections.
2. The power of the right- and extreme right-wing parties increased dramatically in these elections, winning 72 of the total 120 seats in the Knesset, in contrast to the dwindling power of the so-called Zionist left (Meretz and the Labor Party), which won only 13 seats.
3. Gideon Sa'ar, one of the most prominent leaders of the Likud party, affiliated with the right wing, left Likud in a last-minute defection to establish the New Hope party, which won six seats in the Knesset. This is the second far right-wing party, the other led by Lieberman, that is refusing to enter into a government coalition led by Netanyahu.
4. All the parties that were close to the Israeli electoral threshold (3.25% of total votes) succeeded in obtaining Knesset representation, due to the policy that Netanyahu and Lapid followed to prevent the loss of any party from their respective camps, realizing that it would affect the chances of forming a coalition.
5. Netanyahu changed his electoral campaign strategy towards Arabs in these elections, realizing that the Arab parties were a significant factor in the failure of his camp to gain a majority in the previous elections. His racist incitement of Arab voters and their political parties in the previous Knesset elections provoked Arab voters and boosted their voting participation.



Netanyahu thus visited many Arab towns in an attempt to lure Arab voters. Among other factors, this contributed to reducing Arab participation.

6. The rate of public participation in these elections decreased dramatically. Although the number of eligible voters increased by 124,000 voters in these elections, the participants in these elections numbered less than the previous Knesset elections. The general participation rate in these elections dropped to 67.4%, from the 71.52% in the Knesset elections that took place in March 2020. This seems to be a case of election fatigue.
7. The participation rate of Arabs in these elections decreased significantly from 65% in the 23rd Knesset elections in March 2020 to just 46%. The Arab parties were greatly affected by the drop in the voting rate of Arabs in these elections. The Arab parties that entered these elections in two lists obtained 379,000 votes altogether, a huge drop from the 581,000 votes they obtained in the previous elections when they ran on a joint list. In addition to election fatigue, the split to the Joint List dented enthusiasm and the national compass was lost. The joint list's declaration of support for Gantz's candidacy for prime minister after the previous elections led some to conditionally offer support for Netanyahu since supporting right-wing Zionists was now acceptable.

## Electoral Results and Possible Coalition Formation

Many parties ran these elections on different electoral lists from the previous Knesset elections. The Blue and White list was watered down to its initial members following Benny Gantz's participation in the government coalition that Netanyahu formed last year. The Labor-Meretz-Gesher list, the Joint Arab List, which included four parties, and the Yamina list, which was composed of three right-wing fascist parties also disintegrated. In addition, the far-right "New Hope" party, led by Likud defector Gideon Sa'ar, emerged.

Israeli parties in general ran these elections on the same lists as previous elections, and no internal elections were held with the exception of three parties: Labor, Meretz and Balad, which saw subsequent changes to their lists. Likud made some small changes following Sa'ar's departure, affecting Netanyahu's guarantees of some places for Knesset members, such as Orly Levi, head of the Gesher party, and Ofir Sofer of the Yamina alliance, in order to encourage Bezalel Smotrich's Religious Zionist Party to accept an alliance with two other Kahanist fascist parties, Otzma Yehudit and Noam.

Netanyahu has sought to increase the strength of his camp in these elections, taking advantage of his successful campaign to vaccinate the vast majority of adult Israelis against Covid-19, normalize relations between Israel and many Arab countries while intensifying settlement activity in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. He sought to capitalize on his marginalization of the Palestinian cause and even the peace process, which are no longer central issues in the elections, the dismantling of the Blue and White and the Arab Joint Lists, and use the help of the Jewish fascist

right-wing parties to unite in one electoral list that enabled them to cross the threshold and obtain parliamentary representation. However, Likud's electoral strength has decreased significantly compared to the previous elections. He obtained in these elections one million and sixty-six thousand votes, down from one million and three hundred and fifty two thousand. Likud thus lost about 288 thousand votes, bringing down its seats from 36 to 30. The most important reason for this is the low turnout in Likud strongholds and the pivot of some Likud supporters towards the New Hope party.

Shas won 9 seats in these elections, which it had won in the previous elections. United Torah Judaism also maintained the same 7 seats it had won in the previous elections.

In preparation for running these elections, Bezalel Smotrich changed the name of his party from Tkuma to the Religious Zionist Party, in an attempt to win followers of the religious Zionism trend. Just before these elections, Smotrich withdrew from the Yamina list, with the encouragement of the public, and ran for the Knesset on a joint list with two other fascist parties (Otzma Yehudit and Noam), under Netanyahu's watch. The religious Zionist party list won 6 seats, 4 for the party, with 1 the head of the Otzma Yehudit party, and another for the head of Noam.

Yamina decided in the run up to the elections to break with Smotrich and runs solo. This decision came in the context of Naftali Bennett's efforts to expand his party's popular base and win new segments of the religious and secular right alike. Bennett announced at the start of his election campaign that he is running for prime minister, especially since public opinion polls during that period expected him to win about 20 seats. However, opinion poll predictions quickly decreased after the announcement of the formation of the New Hope party. Yamina won 7 seats in these elections, up from the 3 seats it won in the previous elections during its alliance with the fascist right-wing parties.

In light of the collapse of the Blue and White list, when Benny Gantz joined the government coalition that Netanyahu formed last year, Yesh Atid-Telem, led by Yair Lapid ran these elections alone without party alliances. The party ended its alliance with General Moshe Ya'alon's Telem party, who decided not to participate in the elections because he believed that his party could not cross the electoral threshold. Yesh Atid-Telem won 17 seats in these elections, up from the 15 it won in the previous elections, when it ran in the Blue and White coalition list. Gantz's Blue and White party won just 8 seats in these elections, better than the predicted 4 or 5.

Yisrael Beiteinu ran with its same list as previous elections, winning the same 7 seats, most of which come from the votes of voters who immigrated to Israel from former Soviet Union countries. Gideon Sa'ar resigned from the Likud party following a disagreement with Netanyahu, founding the New Hope party before the election. He was soon joined by two MKs, Yoaz Hendel and Zvi Hauser, who had been on the Blue and White list in the last election. Sa'ar also attracted Likud allied MK and head of the Kulanu party, Yifat Shasha-Biton, and Likud MK, Ze'ev Elkin, who was close to Netanyahu. New Hope won 6 seats, the majority of which came from the Likud party base. The Labor Party underwent a vital transformation following the election of Merav Michaeli to replace leader Amir Peretz in



January 2021. The party won 7 seats, up from 3 in the previous elections. Meretz also defied opinion polls to cross the electoral threshold and win 6 seats.

The Arab Joint List, which included four parties, Balad, Hadash, Ta'al, and Ma'an, split following the withdrawal of the Southern Islamic Movement. After this split, the Arab parties ran these elections with two lists: The Joint List and the United Arab List (the Southern Islamic Movement). These two lists have failed to mobilize the Arab electorate to challenge Netanyahu's verbal Arab appeasement. The break-up of the Joint List after weakening Arab parties as individual organizations or institutions demotivated Arab voters. There is also an ever widening gap between expectations and realistic powers of parliamentarians to influence decision-making regarding the Jewish State's treatment of Palestinians within the green line. The failure to take a decisive stance against the Israeli right has not helped to drum up Arab voter support either. The United Arab List leadership expressed a willingness to support any of the two Zionist camps to head the government, claiming that since the joint list supported a coalition led by Gantz as prime minister, why exclude the possibility of supporting a coalition led by Netanyahu? These debates completely derail the balance between the national and civilian components in the reality of the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel and cannot lead to a national unity and action strategy that suits their needs and aspirations and preserves their national identity against Zionism. Moreover, the continuation of such trends may lead to an even greater deterioration. In this climate, Arab participation rates in these elections recorded an unprecedented decline. The Joint List won 6 seats by obtaining 212,000 votes, and the United Arab List won 4 by obtaining 167,000 votes. Thus, the Arab parties lost 5 parliamentary seats since the last elections. The total number of votes obtained by the Arab parties in these elections reached 379 thousand votes, down from 581 thousand in the last elections.<sup>(1)</sup>

## Conclusion

The recent elections did not lift Israel from its impasse. Netanyahu clings to power despite an indictment against him in three corruption cases, and his continuous attempts to obtain a majority in the Knesset to enable him to enact laws preventing his trial. The opposing camp refuse to participate in any government formed by him. Racism prevalent in the majority of Israeli society and its political elites means that many of them have so far refused to form a coalition government based on the support of Arab parties.

The many possible scenarios for forming a coalition government seem difficult, but not impossible. Netanyahu could form a coalition government based on his camp and the Yamina and United Arab Lists, but the many sources of tension would be a ticking time bomb during the negotiations. The difficulty currently lies in convincing the fascist Religious Zionist Party and Naftali Bennett to accept the formation of a government that is not run on a pure Jewish majority and relies on the Islamic

<sup>1</sup> All data related to these elections is based on the reports of the Israeli Central Elections Committee for the 24th Knesset. Accessed on 30/3/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3fpnUmX>.

movement. For an Arab party to support such a government, it is difficult to know what Netanyahu could offer for them to work with fascists who pride themselves on their racism towards Arab citizens. In addition, Netanyahu himself has led the process of enacting racist laws against Arabs within the Green Line, especially the National Law. He pushed the Northern Islamic Movement outside the law, and under his rule and with his and his government's encouragement, settler incursions at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, with the aim of splitting or Judaizing it have increased. He has increased the pace of settlement in Jerusalem and the West Bank, and his government that continues to refuse to combat the criminal gangs that operate among the Palestinian Arabs within the Green Line, and is implicitly encouraging them by the Israeli police turning a blind eye to their activities.

On the other hand, Yair Lapid could form a coalition government based on the support of the Joint Arab List and the United Arab List. This is also unlikely, due to the opposition of Jewish Knesset members in this camp to support a coalition government based on the votes of Arab parties. It seems that that a coalition government between Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett's camps, which would see them taking turns to lead, is more likely than the other scenarios. However, this scenario would be wrought with contradictions that would prove difficult to live with long term. An agreement would only last long enough to see Netanyahu's rule ended and new elections prepared. But if all efforts to form a government fail then new elections are inevitable.