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Why did Netanyahu Decide to Dissolve the Knesset and Re-run the Elections?

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

- Victory Turns to Defeat 1
- Netanyahu’s Chances in the Upcoming Elections 2
- Upcoming Election Alignments 3
- Conclusion 4



Two months after the general elections were held on 9 April 2019, the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided to dissolve the Knesset and call for new elections in September 2019. This was after failing, contrary to all expectations, to form a coalition government from the right-wing camp, which won 65 seats out of the total 120 seats in the Knesset, including 35 seats for the Likud Party led by Netanyahu, because of the conflicts within this camp. Neither the Palestinian cause, foreign policy nor even economic policy played a role in the crisis of forming the government. Rather, the conflict was sparked by two issues: the first is the relationship between religious and secular parties, and the second is Netanyahu's trials in corruption cases.

Victory Turns to Defeat

The failure to form a government is a major blow to Netanyahu, may end his political career, and may lead him to prison. His decision to dissolve the Knesset and to re-run the elections has hampered his plans, although he has not put an end to them, to enact laws in the Knesset aimed at preventing him from being prosecuted as long as he is prime minister. Escaping prosecution in three corruption cases against him and his family, represents the main motive behind Netanyahu's decisions, his electoral alliances and his maneuvers to form a government.

Netanyahu sought to form his government from far-right parties that have a clear majority in the Knesset, not only for ideological and political reasons, but also because opposition parties refuse to enter into a government coalition led by Netanyahu, in light of the decision of the Attorney General, Avichai Mandelblit to indict him for corruption. This strengthened the status of Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Avigdor Lieberman, although his share in the Knesset dropped from seven to five seats in the last Knesset elections. Netanyahu could not form a government without him, given opposition parties' refusal to enter his government coalition.

Aware of Netanyahu's complex situation, Lieberman adhered to his conditions to join the government coalition, foremost among them the conscription of "Haredi" Jews into the Israeli army. Although the Likud and Shas parties came under pressure from Netanyahu and showed flexibility in conscripting the Haredim, Lieberman insisted on all his conditions without exception. Netanyahu has tried to persuade at least one Knesset member from every opposition party to form his own coalition, but he has failed to do so, despite the great temptations he has offered to many MKs. Netanyahu also tried to include the Labour Party in his coalition government on the last day of his deadline to form a government (4 weeks + 2 weeks, or 42 days). He met with Labour Party Chairman Avi Gabay for more than four hours and presented him with a tempting offer that included the post of Minister of Defence and three other ministries, despite him having only six seats in the Knesset. However, four out of the six rejected this offer.⁽¹⁾

¹ Yuval Karni, "We swear allegiance to the state, not to our promises — an interview with Labor Party chairman Avi Gabay," Eid supplement to *Yedioth Ahronoth* (newspaper), 7/6/2019. [Hebrew]



On the same day, Netanyahu also sent a proposal to the leader of the Blue and White political alliance, Benny Gantz, to join the coalition government, but Gantz rejected it under pressure from his partner in the coalition, leader of the Yesh Atid party, Yair Lapid.⁽²⁾

Once the deadline to form a government had passed, Netanyahu found himself faced with two options. He could either go to the head of state and inform him of his failure to form a government, which would mean assigning another Knesset member to form a government after consultations with the heads of blocs in the Knesset, or to invoke a law in the Knesset that would dissolve itself and call for new elections. Netanyahu was afraid of assigning Benny Gantz to form a government, or a Likud leader in the event of the failure of Gantz; which would open the door to starting Netanyahu's trial. It is true that the possibility that Gantz, or a member of the Knesset from the Likud, could succeed in forming a coalition government was weak, but Netanyahu did not wish to take any risks.

Netanyahu's Chances in the Upcoming Elections

In order to form a government, Netanyahu needs his far-right camp in the upcoming Knesset elections to win by a majority of at least 61 Knesset members, without counting the seats of Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party. If he achieves this, he will be able to form a coalition government and immediately begin enacting laws that will protect him from the Supreme Court's authority to intervene in Knesset decisions, especially if the Knesset rejects Netanyahu's parliamentary immunity.

In recent months, Netanyahu has sought to postpone the hearing with Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit for as long as possible, so that he can hold the elections and enact the laws that protect him before Mandelblit makes his final decision to bring him to trial. Initially, Mandelblit set the hearing for Netanyahu on 10 July 2019, but returned and agreed to Netanyahu's request to postpone it, setting a new date for 2 - 3 October 2019. After the dissolution of the Knesset and the date of the new elections announced for 17 September 2019, Netanyahu again requested that the hearing be postponed.⁽³⁾ However, Mandelblit rejected his request this time,⁽⁴⁾ which means that the hearing will be only one day after the new Knesset is inaugurated on 1 October 2019. If the far-right camp wins 60 seats in the Knesset or less, its fate and the fate of its government coalition will again be in the hands of Lieberman, who is expected to pass the threshold, and may increase his seats in the Knesset. If the Blue and White alliance wins the election and its president Gantz forms the government, it will put an end to Netanyahu's rule and open the path to his trial.

On 2 June 2019, Netanyahu dismissed Minister of Education Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked from office following the fall of their party in the Knesset elections. On 5 June,

² Amit Segal, "In a hostile broadcast", *Eid supplement to Yedioth Ahronoth*, 7/6/2019 [Hebrew].

³ Revital Hoppel, "Netanyahu Requested Another Postponement of the Hearing because of Elections," *Haaretz*, 5/6/2019, accessed on 11/6/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2EZwm9h> [Hebrew].

⁴ Revital Hoppel, "The Attorney General Refused Netanyahu's Request to Delay Hearing Again," *Ha'aretz*, 6/6/2019, accessed on 11/6/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2R2IMCm> [Hebrew].



Netanyahu appointed a Knesset member from the Likud's backbenchers, Amir Ohana, as minister of justice. He is one of the most prominent advocates of laws in the Knesset that protect Netanyahu from prosecution. The move angered many of the Likud leaders who had considered themselves first in line for this position, as well as the United Right alliance MK, Smotrich, whom Netanyahu promised the portfolio to on the eve of the previous elections. In the coming days, Netanyahu is expected to appoint the head of the, Rafi Peretz, as minister of education, and Smotrich as transportation minister to strengthen the relationship between Netanyahu and the party.⁽⁵⁾

Upcoming Election Alignments

New alliances are expected to crop up between the different parties for the upcoming Knesset elections, but most of them do not hold primaries for their electoral lists. Netanyahu and Moshe Kahlon, head of the Kulanu party, which won only four seats in the last elections, agreed to run in the next elections on the Likud lists. The Likud secretariat ratified this agreement, whereby the "Kulanu" party gets four seats in the top 35 places on the Likud list, and Moshe Kahlon will be the fifth in this list.

The Shas and United Torah Judaism parties will run for the elections on the same list as in the previous elections. It is not yet known how the five fascist right-wing parties will run the next election. These parties ran in three lists in the last elections, two of them, the New Right party led by Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, and the Zehut party led by Moshe Feiglin fell. Only one list, United Right, the Jewish Home, the Tkuma and the Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), succeeded. Efforts are being made within these parties to mediate a joint list⁽⁶⁾ of rabbis from the settlers to avoid losing the votes of the fascist right, 262,000 votes from which were lost in the previous Knesset elections, equivalent to six or seven seats in the Knesset. It is not yet known what these efforts will come to and whether they will succeed in forming a single electoral list for these parties.

The Yisrael Beiteinu party seeks to increase its popular base among secular Russian immigrants and the secular Israeli ultra-right, trying to place the issues of religion and state at the top of the election agenda, and as an opponent of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties.

The Blue and White list decided to run on the same list as the previous election. It is reluctant to enter into an alliance with the Labour Party for fear of being accused of being on the left, which has become a pariah in Israeli society. This list has been consistent so far, but in and outside it there are calls, from time to time, calling to cease the rotation between Gantz and Lapid as prime minister if it wins the Knesset elections. This would make an understanding easier with the Shas and the United Torah Judaism parties, which are setting up a veto on a coalition led by Lapid because of his extreme secular positions.

5 Noah Lando and Yotam Berger, "Netanyahu Appoints Amir Ohana as Minister of Justice", *Haaretz*, 8/6/2019, accessed 11/6/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2Kc87sX> [Hebrew]

6 Yotam Berger, "Smotrich and Peretz are Trying to Unite the Right but Refuse to Vacate their Places for Bennett and Shaked", *Haaretz*, 2/6/2019, accessed 11/6/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2KBptPk> [Hebrew].



The Labor Party, whose power has deteriorated sharply in the previous Knesset elections and has lost most of its votes to the Blue and White list, has grown worse after the negotiations between its president, Avi Gabay, and Netanyahu about joining Netanyahu's government coalition were revealed. That Gabay was the most vocal advocate of Netanyahu's boycott and commitment not to join his coalition government.

The Labour Party has not yet decided how to participate in the upcoming Knesset elections. Gabay called on the Labour Party not to run for the next Knesset elections, fearing that it will not be able to pass the threshold, and should enter with either the Blue and White or Meretz lists.⁽⁷⁾ The Labour Party conference, to be held this month, will decide how to elect the Labour Party chairman and his electoral list, due to take place in early July 2019.

Similarly, the Meretz party is calling for on a joint list with the Labour Party, because it fears it will not meet the threshold in the next Knesset elections. The Arab parties called for the restructuring of the joint list. If they manage to do that, they are expected to increase their strength, or at least to maintain it. If it fails to reshape the joint list and the elections are held on two lists, there is a danger that Arab indifference will threaten the chances of the two lists.

Conclusion

Netanyahu realizes that the upcoming Knesset elections will determine his political and personal fate, and that not winning them will not only lead to an end to his political career, but also to his trial, which may lead to his imprisonment. It is difficult at this stage to predict the results of these elections, but it is likely that the competition will be strongest in a society where the right and the extreme right are growing stronger and more aggressive, in a regional and international atmosphere that is strongly leaning in favour of Israel.

⁷ "Gabay: Labour must merge in the coming elections with the Blue and White or with Meretz lists," *Haaretz*, 31/5/2019, accessed 11/6/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2Zk1mJ8> [Hebrew].