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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

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Israeli Knesset Elections: The Rise of the Religious Right

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studies draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

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For the fifth time in four years, Israeli voters headed to the polls on 1 November 2022, for the twenty-fifth Knesset election since the founding of Israel. Barely a year has passed since the formation of the rotation government between Naftali Bennett, head of the far-right Yamina party, and Yair Lapid, head of Yesh Atid, in June 2021, putting an end to Benjamin Netanyahu's uninterrupted rule since 2009. But when Netanyahu's opposition attracted several Yamina members the government lost its slim Knesset majority and struggled to pass bills, deepening the cracks in the cracks in the shaky coalition. Accordingly, Bennett and Lapid declared their inability to maintain the government coalition and dissolved the Knesset, setting 1 November as the date for new elections. Under the rotation agreement between them, Lapid has headed the caretaker government since the Knesset was dissolved in June 2022.

Election Results

The election results reveal a significant increase in the strength of the parties in Netanyahu's camp, both in terms of Knesset seats and voter count, compared to the last Knesset election. Netanyahu's camp won 64 of the 120 Knesset seats (2,303,964 votes) in this election, against 52 (1,856,932 votes) in the last elections – a significant increase. In detail, the Likud party won 32 seats (111,049 votes) in these elections compared to 30 seats (1066,892 votes) in 2021, claiming victory. The fascist list combining the Religious Zionism, led by Bezalel Smotrich, and Otzma Yehudit, led by Itamar Ben Gvir, won 14 seats (516,146 votes), compared to the 6 seats (225,641 votes) it obtained in the previous elections.

Meanwhile, Aryeh Deri's Shas party increased its share of the Knesset from 9 seats (316,008) in the previous elections to 11 seats (392,644 votes). Yitzhak Goldknopf's United Torah Judaism party carried over the same 7 seats it won in the last election, but increased its votes from 248,391 to 280,125.

In the anti-Netanyahu camp, which includes Lapid's government, and, in turn, the Ra'am list headed by Mansour Abbas, won 51 seats in the Knesset, and 203,695 votes. Lapid's Yesh Atid gained 7 seats since the last elections, with 24 seats (847,145 votes), compared to 17 (614,112) in 2021. While Benny Gantz's National Unity list (formed at the last minute between Gantz's Blue and White party and Gideon Sa'ar's New Hope, along with former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot) won 12 seats (432,367 votes), down 2 from the last elections, when Blue and White secured 8 seats and New Hope won 6, together obtaining a total of 525,000 votes.

Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu declined from 7 to 6 seats but increased its vote share from 209,000 to 213,621.

The United Arab List (Ra'am) won 5 seats (193,916 votes) compared to 4 seats (167,064) in 2021. The Labor Party led by Merav Michaeli won 4 seats (175,922 votes) down from 7 seats (268,767 votes) in the last Knesset elections. Meretz, led by Zehava Gal-On, did not pass the threshold required to secure a seat, despite obtaining 6 seats in the previous elections, winning 150,715 votes compared to 202,218 in 2021.



The Hadash-Ta'al list, which includes the Communist Hadash Party led by Ayman Odeh, and Ahmed Tibi's Ta'al party, passed the threshold with 5 seats (178,661 votes).

Balad, led by Sami Abu Shehadeh, won 138,093 votes — a major achievement for the party, despite just missing the threshold, given the conspiracy to keep it out of the Joint Arab List to push the list towards the Lapid camp, in addition to the incitement campaign led by state agencies and media against the party, and the other Arab led parties, throughout the electoral campaign.

Netanyahu's Comeback

This result represents a major victory for Netanyahu, who is currently on trial for charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, enabling him to return to power through a coalition government limited to his camp. Over the past four electoral rounds, Netanyahu has tried to obtain a majority in the Knesset that would enable him to enact laws that would throw out his trial, limit the power of the judiciary and the Supreme Court, and prevent them from interfering in decisions made by the government or the Knesset.

Since 1948, Israel has only been ruled by coalition governments as no party has been able to obtain a majority in the Knesset. The electoral system in Israel, which is based on nation-wide proportional representation, allows for a multiplicity of parties. Each party that manages to pass the qualifying threshold obtains parliamentary representation according to the percentage of the votes it receives. The electoral threshold for the first Knesset was just 1%, rising in 1992 to 1.5%, then to 2% in 2006, and then to 3.25% in 2013.

While Netanyahu succeeded in mobilising the parties of his camp behind him in one electoral list, in order for all of them to pass the threshold, disagreement erupted in the ranks of Lapid's opposition camp. Lapid rejected the request of the members of his coalition parties on the eve of the dissolution of the Knesset to amend the threshold law and reduce it from 3.25% to 2%. His efforts also failed to unite Labor and Meretz on a single electoral list, to avoid the risk of one or both of them not crossing the threshold.

Furthermore, some indicate an understanding between Lapid and the Hadash-Ta'al leadership (Odeh and Tibi), to isolate Balad, with Lapid urging them to exclude Balad from the joint Arab list just hours before the electoral lists were submitted on 15 September, in order to be able to market its dependence on the list's support to the Israeli public opinion. Balad, which remains firm in its adherence to Palestinian nationalism, refuses to enter the game of the Zionist camps, to enter or support the government coalition, and also rejects the recommendation of any Zionist candidate to form a government coalition.



The Significance of these Results

The following observations can be noted regarding this election:

1. The main competition in this election, as in the previous four elections, was between the extreme right-wing camp, both secular and religious, which includes fascist parties, and the secular right camp, which also includes extremist groups.
2. The results of the elections showed an unprecedented increase in the strength of the Israeli fascist right. Their list, formed by the alliance of Religious Zionism and Otzma Yehudit, received more than 516,000 votes, most of them cast by young people. Interestingly, this list received 20 percent of soldiers in IDF camps' votes.
3. Notably, the Yamina party collapsed in these elections after winning 7 seats in 2021 that brought its leader Naftali Bennett to the premiership in the rotation government. It is clear that the bases of this party and its far-right cadres were not convinced by its president's personal disengagement from the Netanyahu camp, losing voters to the alliance of the two fascist right-wing parties instead.
4. Meanwhile, the historical Zionist left that founded Israel is on the verge of disappearing completely from the Israeli party map; The Labor Party narrowly crossed the threshold and won only 4 seats, while Meretz failed to cross the threshold.
5. The voter turnout in these elections increased significantly to 70.6% compared to 67.4% in 2021, including both Jews and Arabs.
6. Contrary to expectations, Arab voter turnout increased significantly, rising from 45% to 54%. This increase is attributed to the competition that resulted from Balad contesting the elections independently, after being excluded from the Joint Arab List in collusion with Prime Minister Lapid, and to the popular solidarity and broad support that Balad received as a result. It consequently attracted a wide national audience and encouraged votes, especially from the young generation whose support for Balad and its proposals was clearly visible. Public opinion polls on the eve of the elections had indicated that the percentage of Arab voters might not exceed 38 percent.
7. The Palestinian issue was conspicuously by Jewish Israeli party manifestos, despite the fact that the Lapid government intensified its attacks on the Palestinians in the occupied territories during that time. It launched an attack on Gaza and carried out a continuous series of attacks on cities, towns and camps in the occupied West Bank, killing and wounding hundreds of the Palestinians, and arresting others and imposed collective punishments on them, in order to ramp up popular electoral support. Neither Lapid nor Netanyahu presented any vision for a political solution in their electoral platforms.



Towards a Far-Right Government

It is expected that in the next few weeks, well-ahead of the 45-day deadline, Netanyahu will successfully form a coalition government limited to his camp. The new government will be concerned with domestic issues, especially with regard to the judiciary and the powers of the Supreme Court and the attorney general. The focus will not be limited to enacting laws that nullify Netanyahu's trial, but may go as far as reformulating the boundaries of Israeli democracy by eliminating the checks and balances that give meaning to the democratic system, in line with the vision of Netanyahu and the religious and populist right. He seeks to govern without being held back by these limits on his power, without the Supreme Court, the Attorney General, and the legal advisors to the various ministries being able to restrain the government from taking decisions or carrying out activities that contradict Israeli law.

Israel does not have a well-established liberal tradition, as Western democracies do, that respects the principle of the separation of powers. Although there are basic laws that adopt liberal democratic principles within the framework of the Jewish state, they can be changed by a majority of 61 representatives. Given the shift of Israeli society and its values and political positions towards the extreme right and fascism, it will not be difficult for the next Netanyahu government to enact legislation that the leaders of this camp have been calling for. This includes an "override clause" that gives the Knesset the ability to enact laws opposed by the Supreme Court, and an amendment to the way that Supreme Court judges are appointed to give the government broader powers in their selection, as well as legislation that weakens the status of the attorney general and the judicial advisors to the various ministries.

Conclusion

The government that Netanyahu is on his way to forming represents the continuation of the Israeli societal shift towards the right and the extreme right. The formation of this government, which will include fascist parties, raises important questions and challenges at the Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, and international levels. It is not known how far Netanyahu will go to rewrite the boundaries of Israeli democracy and to enact laws that effectively subordinate the government's judiciary. This judicial authority, which has in any case always been biased towards the Zionist project, for the extremist and fascist right, has for years become a liberal obstacle to the imposition of its values, vision and agenda, whether those related to Israeli society or the Palestinians. This means that a new stage looms, in which the policy of this government may lead to an escalation in the occupied territories, and its most extreme agenda in Israel's history may also meet with a broad international rebuff.