



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The New Netanyahu Government: the Narrowest and Most Extremist So Far

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | May 2015

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After herculean efforts punctuated by a number of real crises, Netanyahu was able to put together his fourth governing coalition. This coalition government relies on 61 seats in the Knesset out of a total of 120; in other words, it has a majority of a single seat.

The Makeup of the New Government

Five far-right parties form Netanyahu's fourth coalition: the Likud party, with 30 seats and 12 ministers; Kulanu, led by Moshe Kahlon, with 10 MKs and three ministers; the fascist Jewish Home led by Naftali Bennett, with eight MKs and three ministers; the ultra-orthodox Shas, with seven seats and three ministers; and ultra-orthodox United Torah Judaism, with six seats and a deputy minister (for religious reasons this party refuses to have a minister in the Israeli government, making up for this with a deputy minister who enjoys full ministerial powers, but who does not participate in cabinet meetings).

After the election results showed that the far-right parties had taken 67 seats in parliament, Netanyahu declared that the coalition government he would form would only comprise parties from the so-called "nationalist camp". Even though Likud won 30 seats at the elections and its joint total with the parties of the nationalist camp was 67 seats, Netanyahu appeared weak to his allies, and his declaration of intent left him open to political blackmail. This was also due to the accumulation of disagreements and tensions between them, as well as to the perception of these parties' leaders that Netanyahu had no alternative to them. The unexpected announcement by Lieberman that he would not join a coalition government only made Netanyahu's position more difficult.

During the negotiations over forming the government, it was expected that the coalition would include the far-right Yisrael Beiteinu (six MKs), which is led by Avigdor Lieberman. However, Lieberman, who was foreign minister in Netanyahu's second and third governments, confounded everyone two days before the deadline for the formation of a government by announcing that he would not join the coalition, even though Netanyahu had offered him the foreign affairs portfolio again. According to

Lieberman, his refusal to join the government was due to Netanyahu's failure to respond to his demands and his renegeing on previous commitments with concessions to Shas and United Torah Judaism, particularly on the issues of ultra-Orthodox Jews doing military service and the budgetary allocations to the ultra-Orthodox sector. Lieberman wanted to strengthen the position of his party from within the opposition, after a considerable drop in support at the elections. His party essentially relies on the votes of hardline, secularist Russian Jews who are opposed to a coalition with the religious parties and adhere to a secular lifestyle in the Jewish state.

The Program of the Extremist Government

Netanyahu's fourth government is seen as more extreme and racist than those which came before, in terms of its vision, composition, personalities, guidelines, and coalition agreements. It is limited to the most extreme and racist parties of the nationalist camp. The fig leaf donned by his previous governments in the form of centrist parties has been pulled away. This government clearly represents the most extreme expansionists and racists. Its only project with reference to the Palestinian issue is to continue settlement in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and oppress the Palestinians. Prime Minister Netanyahu, who stated during the election campaign that a Palestinian state would never be established as long as he was in office, leads these extremist expansionists and racists from the front, as they increase the number of settlements and settlers, and build up infrastructure to create a Jewish settler-colonial reality that enables the annexation of the greatest possible part of the West Bank. Likud ministers in the new coalition government rival Netanyahu in the extremism and racism of their positions. In its political platform, Naftali Bennett's fascistic Jewish Home calls for the annexation of Area C, which would swallow up to 60 percent of the West Bank. Kulanu, under Moshe Kahlon, Shas, and United Torah Judaism all have their own agendas and priorities, but they support boosting and expanding the settlement project in the occupied West Bank.

Despite the U.S. administration and the EU asking the new Israeli government to declare its acceptance of the two-state solution, Netanyahu has refused to do so, and nor is it included in the guidelines of his government. Instead, there is a reference stating that "the Israeli government will promote the political process and work towards a peace agreement with the Palestinians and our neighbors [by] upholding Israel's

security, historical, and national interests.” This means the Israeli government will cling on to settlement and occupation and not reach a peace deal with the Palestinians.

The coalition agreement between Likud and Jewish Home affirms that the new government will advance an aggressive settlement policy. This includes a commitment to “legalize” settlement outposts set up unofficially over the last two decades, and which the government of Ariel Sharon pledged to the U.S. that it would remove. The agreement stipulates that within one month of the formation of the government a task force would be set up to grant legal status to settlement outposts, which number about 100. This task force will comprise the cabinet secretary, the Minister of Justice, Ayelet Shaked of the Jewish Home party, and the Minister of Agriculture, Uri Ariel, and will present its recommendations to the government within 60 days of its formation.

The agreement also stipulates that a Jewish Home MK, Eli Dahan, who has stated that “the Palestinians are animals who do not belong to the human race and do not deserve to live,” be appointed deputy defense minister responsible for the Israeli “Civil Administration,” which is subordinate to the Israeli army, and which enjoys sweeping powers over Palestinians and settlers in the OPT. By virtue of the agreement, the “Settlement Department,” which pumps enormous funds into Jewish settlements in the OPT, will become part of the Ministry of Agriculture, whose portfolio has gone to the racist Uri Ariel from Jewish Home. Under the coalition agreement, the Agriculture Ministry has been charged with monitoring the situation of Arabs in the Negev inside the Green Line in order to implement the “Praver Plan”, which aims to seize hundreds of thousands of dunams of Bedouin Arab land in the Negev, drive the population out of dozens of towns and villages that Israel does not recognize, and gather them in settlements of limited size and amenities.

The Future of the Fourth Netanyahu Government

Clearly, it will be difficult for a government which relies on a majority of one to survive for a long period. It is constantly at risk of political blackmail by the coalition parties and by any MK in the coalition. It will be difficult for it to carry out serious reforms, particularly those linked to lowering the cost of living and housing that require the action of Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon of Kulanu. Netanyahu is aware that in order to keep the government alive he has to expand it as soon as possible, otherwise it will be

liable to fall. Theoretically, he has a number of possibilities: after a few months he could approach the Yesh Atid party led by Lapid, Yisrael Beiteinu led by Lieberman, or the Zionist Camp led by Herzog, and invite them to join his government. It is not envisaged that Lapid will respond favorably to the offer, as he rejects outright the idea of sitting in government with Shas and United Torah Judaism. It is also not envisaged that Lieberman will choose to join the Netanyahu government because of the strong rift between the two men and because Lieberman will try to rebuild his party from within the opposition.

Things are different regarding the position of the Zionist Camp led by Yitzhak Herzog. Although the possibility of the Zionist Camp joining the coalition is to be excluded for the moment, it is possible that in a few months, or over the coming year, talks will take place between the Zionist Camp and Likud to form a national unity government in view of the evolving challenges Israel faces. From the outset of the election campaign until now, Yitzhak Herzog has been careful not to take any firm and final position against joining a national unity government with Netanyahu. If Herzog chooses to enter the Netanyahu government under any guise, the path will not be easy. This is because there is resistance to the idea from within the Zionist Camp, whether from the Labor Party or Hatnuah led by Tzipi Livni. There are many justifications offered from within the Zionist Camp in support of entering government, most significantly:

1. The enormous challenges Israel faces, such as the tension in relations with the U.S. administration and the EU, the pressure on Israel to activate the political process with the Palestinians, the possibility of intensified Palestinian confrontation of Israel in the OPT and on the international stage, the Iranian nuclear program, and the international isolation that a right-wing government might have to endure.
2. Entering the government in order to influence it from within.

3. The Zionist Camp joining the government would limit its extremism in foreign policy issues and help rationalize its decisions. This would lessen tensions with the U.S. administration and the EU.
4. Joining the government and Yitzhak Herzog becoming foreign minister would strengthen his status and might qualify him to compete better against Netanyahu in the next Knesset elections.

Conversely, there are a number of arguments against the Zionist Camp joining the government: such a step might influence certain aspects of government policy but will not affect the foundations of Netanyahu's policy concerning settlement. Along with this, the Zionist Camp will not be able to form an alternative to Likud rule if it enters government—national unity governments generally strengthen the position of the Likud and far-right and weaken the "Zionist left." This is proved by the fact that the Labor party has only come to power in the last two decades from opposition, as happened in 1992 and 1999.

Conclusion

The fourth Netanyahu government is the most extreme and aggressive yet. Its sole project is to strengthen and expand settlement, and to deal with the Palestinians in the OPT and inside the Green Line with the logic of force. Objectively, there is a chance to isolate this government on the international stage. The Palestinians have no choice but to use their strengths and follow a policy of confrontation with the occupation in the OPT, while working with all their energies internationally to isolate Israel and seek the imposition of sanctions. Thus Israel will be made to pay the price for continuing the occupation and settlements, and compelled to respond to Palestinian rights.