

‘Bibi strikes back’ Israeli elections in a transforming domestic and international landscape

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Netanyahu, ‘King of Israel’?

On 17 March 2015 Israeli citizens massively headed to the polls to renew the composition of the Knesset, the country’s legislative body, thereby also electing a new government after the early termination of the ruling coalition elected in 2013.

Despite mounting suspense during the latest rounds of the electoral campaign, and contrary to misleading exit polls, the elections resulted in a decisive victory for Benjamin Netanyahu, the incumbent Prime Minister and the leader of right-wing Likud. Netanyahu’s party gained 30 seats, out of a total of 120, 6 more than its main competitor, the left-wing Zionist Union of the Labour leader, Yitzchak Herzog, and the former Justice Minister, Tzipi Livni. Third in line was the United Arab List, made up of an unprecedented coalition of Israel’s Arab parties (13 seats), followed by former Finance Minister Yair Lapid’s Yesh Atid (11), and another, brand-new centrist movement, Kulanu, founded by former Likud member Moshe Kahlon (10). A smaller but strategically relevant consensus was achieved by the right-wing conservative Habayit Hayehudi (8) and Yisrael Beitenu (6), as well as by the two biggest ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas (7) and United Torah Judaism (6). Finally, gaining only 5 seats, the post-Communist party Meretz met severe defeat.

These results undeniably crown ‘Bibi’ as the uncontested ‘king’ of Israeli politics, potentially making him the longest-serving Prime Minister in the country’s history: a record virtually outshining the legendary ‘father of the nation’, David Ben-Gurion. Succeeding in an election that often appeared as a referendum on his very leadership, Netanyahu seems to have shrewdly won the ambitious bet made last December, when he called for anticipated elections: consolidating a distinctively right-wing governing block under Likud’s (and his own) undisputed control. Despite some last-minute hypotheses, it is now very likely that Netanyahu will be in a position to dismiss Israeli President Reuven Rivlin’s earlier call for a ‘national unity government’ with the Zionist Union, opting instead for a more politically homogenous coalition with his earlier allies Habayit Hayehudi and Yisrael Beitenu, Kulanu, plus the two ultra-Orthodox forces.

Yet, while the recent electoral test has undoubtedly proved his tactical abilities as a seasoned demiurge of Israeli politics, Netanyahu and his coalition partners will need to address considerable political challenges in the next few months, both within and outside of Israel.

A polarised political scene at home

The Israeli electoral campaign basically revolved around two key subjects: the improvement of citizens’ socio-economic conditions and Israel’s national security.

Investing in a decade-long process of right-wing drift of Israeli voters, and building on a ‘fortress mind-set’, which has progressively taken root in the country, Netanyahu could promptly neutralise most of the left’s narrative on social equity and present himself as the strong man that Israel desperately needs to confront a challenging security environment, both in relations with Palestinians and in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In doing so, Bibi did not refrain from antagonising Israeli Arabs and their political representatives, calling his right-wing voters to help counter the ‘danger’ of Arabs going to polls “in droves”.

While the Prime Minister’s alarm call secured him much-needed electoral gains, the longer-term consequences of that move could prove to be destabilising: by bluntly implying the legitimacy of a narrowly-conceived Jewish character of the state,

Netanyahu further exacerbated Israel's harsh debate on the very foundations of Israel's national identity, while potentially harming its deep-rooted democratic tradition, as severely pointed out by President Rivlin.

Also, while Bibi's efforts to 'securitise' the domestic political discourse in the country has been somewhat helped by the positive economic performance of the 'Start-Up Nation', this will not spare him from the need to effectively address the prospects of the country's 'social contract' in the near future. Indeed, appeasing Kulanu's constituency on the rising living costs for the Israeli middle-class, while winning the continuing support of some publicly-subsidised sectors of the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox community, will likely mark, among other issues, the start of his new term. Things might get even more complicated, should the (very) slim prospects of a 'national unity government' become more concrete in the next few days.

A deteriorating regional and global environment

Foreign policy normally does not resonate in domestic electoral campaigns. However, Israel's geography and history provide enough ground for making an exception to this universal law. Israel's international posture figured prominently in Netanyahu's political strategy, from his provocative speech at the Republican-dominated US Congress against President Obama's approach towards Iran, to continued warnings against jihadi terrorist threats at Israel's borders, up to his most recent 'flip-flop' attitude towards the suitability of the two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian question.

However successful Netanyahu's foreign policy moves were in guaranteeing his re-election, these will face a deteriorating regional and international diplomatic environment, which might offer little reward for Israel's current posture. The Palestinian Authority has reacted strongly to Netanyahu's contradictory remarks on the peace process and might further pursue its 'diplomatic offensive' through multilateral bodies, including the International Criminal Court, and *vis-à-vis* third countries: a move that will further poison relations with Israel. Israel's influence on the actual outcome of the Iranian nuclear dossier remains limited and might even decrease in the light of a too confrontational approach against the US and its negotiating partners. Following Bibi's aggressive rhetoric, the Obama Administration's attitude towards Israel is undergoing some reappraisal, perhaps even revising its traditional voting behaviour in the UN Security Council on the Israeli-Palestinian question, also in the context of an unprecedented politicised domestic debate on US-Israel relations. Israel's likely continuation of its mostly passive policies in the post-Arab Spring MENA region, albeit encouraged by widespread regional instability, might still deprive the country from the political and diplomatic clout needed for the longer-term advancement of its relations with Arab neighbours. The overall result of such still evolving dynamics can thus result in perilous international isolation for Netanyahu's incoming government.

Israeli elections have sent ambiguous messages to the world about Bibi's future domestic and foreign policy agenda. In the end, much will depend on the steps taken by the new Israeli government in the near future, from constructive action – or lack thereof – on the Iranian and Palestinian dossiers to the distribution of crucial ministerial portfolios and, possibly, the appointment of new diplomatic representatives abroad. Bibi's political and personal signalling strategy will be crucial in shaping the future of Israel's interaction with regional and global actors. The same applies, of course, to the broad but often turbulent relationship with the European Union and its member states.

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