

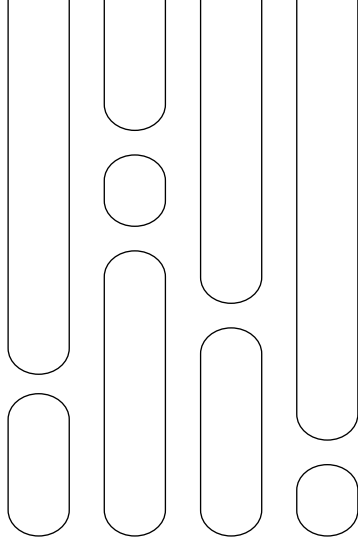
REPORT

THE PARADOXES OF ISRAELI DOMESTIC POLITICS

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
The Beginning of Bennett’s Coalition Crisis.....	4
Signs of Schisms in the Religious Right Bloc.....	5
Conclusion	7



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Introduction

Israel's outgoing coalition led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and alternate Prime Minister Yair Lapid have been desperately battling to maintain their cohesion and steadfastness in the face of opposition blows led by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the demands and blackmail of some right-wing parties within the coalition itself and Bennett's own party, Yamina, over the past year.

It seems that the inner blows to the coalition itself, including the defections of some prominent members from Bennett's Yamina party, was the most important reason why Bennett and Lapid announced the dissolution of the Knesset and called for new elections, the fifth in three years. However, the vote on the bill to dissolve the Knesset on Monday evening, June 27 was surprising. Observers expected that the overwhelming majority of Knesset members would immediately vote for the resolution and then call for new elections. But the most obdurate members of the opposition in the history of Israel, who were relentless in calling for the need to dissolve the Knesset and overthrow the coalition, suddenly toned down and called for the vote to dissolve the Knesset to be delayed until next week. Their motivation for delaying the vote is that the opposition hopes to form an alternate right-wing and broader government to replace the current coalition without having

to head to new elections. However, the coalition insists on dissolving the Knesset to temporarily block the path for Netanyahu. This can be realized in case of Lapid's assumption of the transitional government in the current situation according to the rotation agreement decided between Bennett and Yair a year ago and elections can be held at a time to be determined later.

The Beginning of Bennett's Coalition Crisis

It can be argued that the current crisis facing the Bennett coalition, which is not heterogeneous in its components, started on April 6. Earlier that day, MK Idit Silman, a member of Bennett's Yamina party, announced that she intended to resign from the government coalition. This caused Naftali's government to lose its majority in the Knesset, as the opposition, made up of far-right and religious parties, suddenly had the same number of parliamentary seats as the government.

At the time, Israeli media outlets unanimously described the sudden withdrawal as a shocking and dramatic development and mentioned that the possibility of holding early elections may be off.

Idit Silman's decision to resign came after a dispute with the minister of health and leader of the left-wing Meretz party over allowing the introduction of food items containing yeast into hospitals during the Jewish Passover, which began in mid-April, which is prohibited in Judaism.

The crisis of the ruling coalition worsened when the United Arab List at the time announced the suspension of its membership in the coalition after it lost its razor-thin majority in the Knesset. However, the United Arab List announced shortly afterward its return, justifying this by saying that it wanted to "give the coalition a second chance." This move led the far-right nationalist Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, to make a fiery statement about the proposed changes to the Jewish nation-state law to recognize minorities in Israel. Lieberman has always been known for his hardline positions against Arab citizens as he considers them to be supporters of terrorism. He has always been against Jewish religious parties that seek to impose the teachings of Judaism on society and the state. A year ago, he was deeply hesitant to join the ruling coalition because it included the United Arab List, but he was forced to accept this reality because of enmity towards Netanyahu and his religious allies.

Another blow to the coalition came from the party of its leader, Yamina. The members of this party were unable to overcome their right-wing orientations and get along with their coalition partners. On June 13, Yamina's MK Nir Orbach announced his withdrawal from the coalition, dropping

the coalition's seats in the Knesset to 59. In a statement, Orbach accused "extremist and anti-Zionist members," such as the Arab representatives Mazen Ghnaim (United Arab List) and Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi (Meretz), of pulling the coalition in "problematic directions" and "holding it hostage." Orbach said that the coalition had failed in its key mission of lifting the spirits of Israelis." He vowed to work to form an alternative coalition with "a patriotic spirit" in the existing Knesset – a tall order given that the legislative body appears to still contain a majority of members who refuse to join a coalition that is headed by Netanyahu, the opposition's leader. Orbach withdrew as the ruling bloc failed to pass legislation extending Israeli legal provisions to settlers living in the West Bank. Another former Yamina party member Amichai Chikli voted against the bill along with the opposition. According to leaked news, due to the positions of the three aforementioned MKs (Idit Silman, Nir Orbach, and Amichai Chikli), Netanyahu could attempt to win all three over to his Likud party, hence winning their seats in his favor.

Signs of Schisms in the Religious Right Bloc

For many years, the right-wing bloc, which backed the Likud party led by Benjamin Netanyahu, was the most consistent and stable, as illustrated by Netanyahu's 12 years in power. However, Israel's right-wing is divided into two parts: the religious right and the national right. The right-wing was generally one bloc until disagreements surfaced between its religious and national parts over many bills, such as the religious wing's insistence on the exemption of religious students from military service, and its demands to shut all shops and stop public transportation on Saturday along with other issues. These demands were sharply rejected by the national right wing, primarily the Beiteinu party led by Avigdor Lieberman, a fierce anti-religious party in the bloc. Lieberman withdrew from the government years ago because of the aforementioned problems and this was the beginning of the current cycle of problems. The Likud party maintained its alliance with the religious parties: United Torah Judaism, Shas, and Religious Zionism. The reason why these four parties remained in one bloc is because of Netanyahu's inclination to always support the demands of the religious parties, especially regarding settlement expansion, and how to deal with the Palestinians. In return, these religious parties have been able to keep their seats in the Knesset and subsequently ensure that Netanyahu has a large number of seats, even if they are indecisive. Therefore, these parties for

Netanyahu form a strong bulwark against his opponents and the judiciary that is prosecuting him on corruption charges.

Yet, the political stalemate in Israel has reached a stage where it only can be overcome by an important change in this religious right-wing bloc, which is primarily responsible for the political deadlock in Israel.

Signs of a major shift in the religious parties bloc emerged on Sunday evening, June 26. [Channel Two quoted leaders of the United Torah Judaism and Shas parties](#) as saying that if Netanyahu cannot win 61 seats in the upcoming parliamentary elections, they would propose the formation of a rotation government with the Blue and White party headed by Benny Gantz. The ultra-Orthodox leaders expressed confidence that the Likud Party would agree to this proposal.

This step by the ultra-Orthodox leaders aims to present Netanyahu with a *fait accompli* in light of the weak prospects of forming an alternative government under the current situation in the Knesset. They said that they will no longer stay in the opposition while no one cares whether they sit in a government with Lapid or Lieberman. They emphasized that they would propose to Benny Gantz to head a government with the right-wing bloc if Netanyahu is unable to win 61 seats. However, Ben Gvir may be excluded from this bloc. Netanyahu would be the alternative prime minister with or without a rotation agreement. As such, these ultra-Orthodox leaders would ensure that they return to the ruling coalition and send off their opponents to the opposition, while keeping bridges with the national right.

The position of the religious parties demonstrates their lack of confidence in Netanyahu's ability to progress in the current round and his inability to win over his opponents from the left, center left and the national right. The position is also an indicator of the fact that there is a cleavage in the strong alliance between Netanyahu and the religious parties which has effectively crippled Israel politically.

The Likud party's response to the position of its "allies" was quick when MK [Miki Zohar](#) strongly criticized the ultra-Orthodox leaders on Monday, June 27. He stressed that only the Likud party can get enough seats for a future alliance. In a radio interview, Zohar said, "The Haredim [ultra-Orthodox leaders] committed a serious mistake with their statement on Gantz."

He added, "They worsen their chances of being in the next coalition. The ultra-Orthodox have a glass ceiling of 16 seats. Only Likud can secure the 61 Knesset seats."

“They prevent us making this happen by announcing that Gantz will be prime minister and I’m telling you Benny Gantz will not be prime minister. I am also telling you that what the ultra-Orthodox will do, they’ll sit like good kids in alliance with us,” Zohar said.

It also seems that Netanyahu’s intransigence is a burden even on his own Likud party. The most prominent indication of this issue was when [Israel Hayom](#), the Likud party’s mouthpiece, quoted party leaders as saying that “the upcoming election is Netanyahu’s last chance.” These leaders also said that if Netanyahu cannot secure 61 seats in the Knesset, they will not consider themselves to be partners with the right-wing bloc. Finally, they indicated that behind closed doors, Netanyahu’s supporters say that they will not follow him to a sixth election campaign and they will force him to stand down.

These aforesaid developments demonstrate that the prospect of forming a right-wing government in Israel has declined, especially after the rifts exposed in the most powerful bloc, whose members admitted that some concessions may be necessary to end the country’s political stalemate.

Conclusion

Accordingly, the two blocs (Bennet’s and Netanyahu’s) competing for the majority in the Israeli Knesset are plagued by internal divisions. The ruling coalition is a mix of contradictions. It includes right-wing parties such as Yamina, led by Naftali Bennett, who has a predominantly religious character; Yisrael Beiteinu, led by Avigdor Lieberman; and New Hope, which defected from the Likud party led by Gideon Saar. The aforementioned parties were Netanyahu’s traditional allies before they separated from him in the hope of resolving the crisis situation. The coalition also includes parties affiliated with the center-left: Yesh Atid led by Yair Lapid, Blue and White led by Defense Minister Benny Gantz, and Labor led by MK Merav Michaeli; the left-wing party Meretz led by Nitzan Horowitz, and the United Arab List (Ra’am) led by MK Mansour Abbas.

These parties are of opposing ideologies and do not share a common vision because of various issues. In fact, they only have one single emblem in common, “No Netanyahu.” This is why the ruling coalition has been unstable since its formation, and failed to resolve critical issues due to their intractable differences and disputes. This is evidenced by the great controversy over the recently introduced bill to extend Israeli civil law to Israelis living in the West Bank. As a result, the right-winger Nir Orbach withdrew from the coalition, and members of the prime minister’s party,

Yamina, voted against it and aligned with the opposition's position on this bill due to its right-wing tendencies. This demonstrates the adherence of Knesset members to their own ideologies rather than committing to their coalition partners.

As for the right-wing bloc, which has been strong over the years, it has shown signs of dissatisfaction with Netanyahu because he has repeatedly failed to achieve a comfortable majority for the right wing in the Knesset. This dissatisfaction has even plagued his own Likud party. The aforementioned is a possible indication that right-wing parties view Netanyahu's presence as an obstacle to the formation of a stable government which will run the country effectively. Netanyahu's withdrawal, if achieved, may bring back the right-wing parties, especially Yamina and New Hope, to the right-wing bloc. However, the Yisrael Beitenu party, a nationalist party, may stay out of the two camps to once again play a balancing role between the two blocs.

The two Arab parties hold divergent positions as well. The left-wing Joint List led by Ayman Odeh will likely seek to keep its partnership with the leftist parties such as Meretz and Labor owing to their convergence on numerous issues. The "Islamic" United Arab List, led by Mansour Abbas, on the other hand, demonstrated over the past period its pragmatism and willingness to align with any bloc that meets its demands. However, this pragmatism has failed to convince all right-wing parties to regard it as a reliable partner, rather it is regarded as unreliable, as confirmed by the head of the coalition himself Naftali Bennett two days ago.

It remains to be seen whether the bill to dissolve the Knesset will be finally passed or not. If passed, we may see major developments based on the foregoing. For example, the right-wing will reorganize itself and settle its problems, even at the cost of removing Netanyahu and entering into a stable coalition with center-left parties, especially those headed by military personnel, in order to gain a comfortable majority in the Knesset, which could help Israel to exit from this current political quagmire.



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