

# Right-wing Israeli parties begin talks on coalition

Patrick Martin  
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Israeli President Reuven Rivlin announced Wednesday he would meet with Israeli party leaders beginning Sunday to discuss the formation of the next coalition government, once the vote count has been finalized from Tuesday's parliamentary election. Votes from Israeli soldiers, prisoners and hospital patients were still being counted Wednesday.

All indications are that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will head a six-party right-wing coalition government as a result of the March 17 vote. Netanyahu's Likud Party won 30 seats in the Knesset, the most of any party.

Likud gained ten seats over its showing in the last election, in 2013, while the Zionist Union, a merger of the Labor Party and the small Hatnua Party of former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, gained three seats, as did the United Arab List, a merger of four Arab parties spanning a spectrum from Islamist to Stalinist.

Likud's likely coalition partners include the ultra-right Jewish Home and Yisrael Beitenu, with eight and six seats respectively, the ultra-orthodox Shas (seven seats), United Torah Judaism (six seats) and Kulanu, a breakaway from Likud, which won ten seats. The resulting coalition would have a majority of 67 seats.

Four parties will be in opposition: the Zionist Union, with 24 seats, the Yesh Atid party of broadcaster Yair Lapid, which won 11 seats, the middle-class "left" Meretz, which barely made the cutoff to enter parliament, with four seats, and the United Arab List, whose 14 seats made it the third-largest grouping in the Knesset.

President Rivlin had previously expressed support for a national unity coalition including both Likud and Zionist Union, which would enjoy a top-heavy majority, but both Netanyahu and Zionist Union leader Isaac Herzog dismissed the possibility.

The near-final results gave the newly formed Kulanu party ("All of Us" in Hebrew), led by Moshe Kahlon, a former Likud cabinet minister, a pivotal role. Kahlon broke with Netanyahu last year over economic policies, seeking to appeal to working class and lower-middle class Sephardic voters concerned over stagnant wages and soaring housing costs.

Kahlon made demagogic promises of a "social revolution" in government policy to favor hard-pressed lower-income families, and won a significant vote. He criticized Netanyahu's constant invocations of the threat of an Iranian nuclear bomb, declaring, "I haven't seen a young person leave Israel because of the Iranian threat or because of Islamic State, but I have met a lot of young people abroad who left because they had lost hope."

This electoral posturing has been quickly discarded for horse-trading over cabinet posts. Kahlon said Wednesday he had already spoken with Netanyahu and would hold formal coalition talks on joining the next government, with himself as finance minister.

A majority coalition including Zionist Union, Yesh Atid, Meretz and Kulanu was mathematically possible, but only with the participation or support of the United Arab List. Zionist Union leader Herzog foreclosed that option by conceding defeat Wednesday, saying voters had "pronounced our verdict" and that his party would lead the opposition.

Herzog's speedy capitulation was of a piece with the entire campaign waged by the Zionist "left," which defends the interests of the Israeli financial aristocracy just as fervently as Likud and the ultra-right, albeit with tactical differences over how best to maneuver with US imperialism and its various client states in the Middle East.

Analysis of the distribution and pattern of the voting

suggests that Netanyahu, who was trailing in pre-election polls, was able to win a response with his last-ditch appeals to security fears and anti-Arab racism. Mid-morning on Election Day, he made a widely publicized appearance at Har Homa, a Jewish suburb of East Jerusalem built illegally on Arab land, to warn that his right-wing government was in danger because of a high turnout by Israeli Arab voters.

As late as 6 p.m. Israeli time, voter turnout was actually below that of the previous election in 2013. But in the final four hours there was a surge in voting, with the result that turnout reached nearly 72 percent, as compared to 67 percent in 2013. This was still well short of the 1999 mark of 78 percent.

Much of this late-hour surge was not captured in exit polls, which reported a virtual tie between Likud and Zionist Union. It seems likely this late vote favored Likud and its allies.

According to one analysis of voting patterns, Netanyahu “won this election by convincing over 200,000 voters who were planning to vote for Jewish Home, Shas, Kulanu and Yahad to change their minds in the last six days of the campaign.”

Yahad, a breakaway from Shas, narrowly failed to make the 3.25 percent required for representation in parliament, and each of the other three parties lost seats compared to the pre-election poll predictions.

The geographical distribution of the vote reveals many of the intractable contradictions of Israeli society. Tel Aviv, the largest city and the commercial center, voted heavily for Zionist Union and the liberal Meretz Party, with only 18 percent of the vote for Likud. Yesh Atid, which had been the leading party in Tel Aviv in 2013, fell to fourth place, as its voters turned back to Zionist Union.

In Jerusalem, the balance was the opposite, with Likud leading with 24.2 percent of the vote, followed by United Torah Judaism at 12.1 percent and Zionist Union trailing with 8.4 percent. Zionist Union led narrowly in Haifa, with 25.3 percent to Likud’s 20.7 percent.

Outside the three big cities, however, Likud led almost everywhere, sweeping southern Israel with nearly 40 percent of the vote compared to 12 percent for Zionist Union, and carrying towns in Galilee such as Kiryat Shmona, Nahariya, Afula and Safed.

The United Arab List swept over 90 percent of the

vote in predominately Arab towns like Nazareth, Taybeh and Umm al-Fam. Arab voter turnout increased sharply, to more than 60 percent, compared to 53 percent in 2013.

The nearly 400,000 Israelis living in settlements on the West Bank voted overwhelming for Jewish Home, Yisrael Beitenu and the ultra-orthodox parties. Settlers are heavily over-represented in the Knesset, comprising more than ten percent of its members although only 4.4 percent of Israelis live on the West Bank.



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