

Netanyahu forms far-right coalition government in Israel

Jean Shaoul
8 May 2015

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formed a government Wednesday, just hours before a deadline for announcing a coalition.

Six weeks after winning the largest number of seats in the 120-member Knesset, he now has a coalition commanding just 61 votes.

Its membership and size makes it the most right-wing coalition in Israel's history and also the most unstable. Its agenda will be determined by Israel's grasping oligarchs who, like their counterparts elsewhere, have no solution to the problems besetting the country other than more militarism and austerity.

Last December, Netanyahu precipitated elections two years ahead of schedule by sacking Finance Minister Yair Lapid and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni—leaders of two of the parties in his previous dysfunctional coalition, in the belief that the disarray of the opposition parties would enable him to win a large majority and form a more pliant coalition based on Israel's ultra-right-wing parties. This would allow him to push through an austerity budget, while pursuing an aggressive policy towards the Palestinians and preparing for a possible attack on Iran.

Instead, Netanyahu encountered opposition to his constant Iran-baiting, which ran counter to Washington's plans to draw Tehran into a broader anti-Russia and China alliance. He made a speech to a joint session of the US Congress, organised by the Republican Party leadership behind the back of the Obama administration, where he opposed any US-Tehran deal. But this was widely opposed by the opposition parties, the media and business circles as transparent electioneering that jeopardised Washington's support for Israel.

Opinion polls predicted that the Labour Party's Zionist Union coalition would win the most seats.

Netanyahu and other Likud leaders went so far as to insinuate that Washington was behind the rise in support for the Zionist Union.

In the end, Netanyahu was only able to secure 30 seats for the Likud Party and win the election on March 17 after making a last ditch appeal to right-wing voters, particularly in Avigdor Lieberman's Israel Beiteinu (Israel is Our home) and Naftali Bennett's Beit Yehudi (Jewish Home). He disavowed his 2009 agreement to support a "two state solution" and launched an ultra-nationalist and anti-Palestinian tirade. He called for right-wing voters to go to the polls to counter Israeli Palestinians who were turning out "in droves."

Despite these efforts, he was unable to secure a stable and viable coalition—forcing him to ask Israel's president for a two week extension to form a government. Then last week, his former ally and foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman and his Israel Beiteinu Party pulled out amid bitter recriminations and complaints that Netanyahu was not "nationalistic" enough. Netanyahu was forced to make significant concessions to secure a deal with Naftali Bennett and his Beit Yehudi party, which has eight seats and with whom relations had been both fractious and venomous.

Bennett supports the expansion of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, is opposed to any Palestinian statelet, however circumscribed, and advocates the annexation of Area C—the majority of the West Bank. While not substantially different from Netanyahu's, such policies when so publicly declared run counter to the Obama administration's calls for "talks with the Palestinians."

The "peace process" is a sop to legitimise the ongoing US military operations, both open and covert, in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, to secure hegemony over the Middle East and whose ultimate target is Iran. These

operations depend upon Arab bases and military participation.

In return for saving Netanyahu's premiership, Bennett demanded and got the Justice Ministry for Ayelet Shaked of the Jewish Home party. Shaked is virulently hostile to both the Palestinians and African migrants, whom she has said pose a threat to Israel's Jewish character. She has pressed for the "Jewish Nationality Bill," which would further jeopardise the citizenship of Israel's own Palestinians who form 20 percent of the population.

Shaked will also head the powerful Ministerial Committee for Legislation and the Judicial Appointments. She has been at the forefront of the right-wing push to curb the powers of Israel's Supreme Court to strike down government legislation. Netanyahu himself proposes to expand the judicial appointments committee that selects Israel's judges with a minister and an additional legislator, giving politicians a majority on the committee and thus paving the way for the government to pack the court.

Uri Ariel, also from Jewish Home, will take the agriculture portfolio, giving Jewish Home control over the World Zionist Organization's Settlement Division, which funds infrastructure for West Bank settlements. He will also be responsible for Bedouin affairs, against a background of bitter disputes over plans to deprive the Bedouins of their ancestral homes.

Bennett himself will head the education ministry, whose budget is to be increased by \$163 million. The pay of conscript soldiers in their third year is set to rise at a cost of \$250 million, while Ariel University, Israel's newest university located in the West Bank, will have its budget increased.

Other members of the Netanyahu's new coalition include Kulanu (All of Us), a Likud splinter group (ten seats), the ultra-Orthodox Shas (seven seats) and United Torah Judaism (six seats).

Kulanu's chief, Moshe Kahlan, who favours an economic shakeup of Israel's monopolies, will get the finance ministry, while the housing and environment ministries will go to other members of Kulanu. Shas will get the economy and religious affairs ministries. Moshe Ya'alon of Likud is expected to retain the defence portfolio.

The coalition has agreed to repeal a law that expands the military draft to include the ultra-Orthodox and

another law easing the conversion process to Judaism. While Likud plans to introduce a Jewish Nationality Bill and a law to circumscribe the Supreme Court's power, the coalition parties will have a free vote on these issues.

Netanyahu's wheeling and dealing, to secure a majority of one, leaves him in charge of a fractious cabinet and subject to blackmailing by his partners in pursuit of their own interests and social bases.

The opposition includes the Zionist Union with 24 seats, TV presenter Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid (11 seats), the middle class liberal and former "peace" party Meretz (four seats), and the Arab United List with 14 seats.

Netanyahu has conspicuously not replaced his former Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, instead reserving the post for himself in addition to the premiership. This leaves the door open for a possible deal with Isaac Herzog's Zionist Union and a key cabinet role for Herzog or one of his allies. This would, as well as securing his government, help to mend fences with Washington, which is anxious to see a more malleable figure in charge of foreign relations.

Herzog, who ran his campaign on the slogan "Anyone but Bibi [Netanyahu's nickname]," said that the party's natural place is in opposition to Likud. But true to form, he did not explicitly rule out joining a Netanyahu-led government.



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