COMMENTARY | POLITICS

Understanding Netanyahu's Political Survival

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Overview

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has dominated Israeli politics for nearly 25 years, first between 1996 and 1999 and then again since 2009. Winning a total of five elections, he has become the longest-serving prime minister in the country's history and has laid the foundation of the model of one-man rule in Israel. He has consolidated his political power, dominated the Israeli media, and created an aura of invincibility, prompting his supporters to dub him the "king."[12]

Despite recent challenges to his rule, including his right-wing bloc failing to gain enough seats in the past two elections to form a government without building a coalition, as well as corruption charges levied against him, Netanyahu has managed to remain in office.

To understand Netanyahu's political survival, it is necessary to map the Israeli right wing and its internal conflicts. This commentary analyzes Israel's domestic politics, focusing on Netanyahu's political doctrine and practice, and attempts to explain Netanyahu's political longevity.

Establishing a One-Man Show

Netanyahu has used two main strategies to reinforce his political power from

within the Israeli government. First, he has held multiple positions at the same time: During his terms as prime minister, he also presided over various ministries, the last of which were those of communications, agriculture, and health, as well as welfare and social services. He was forced to resign from these positions in December 2019 due to the criminal charges against him. Second, he has expanded the practice of political appointments to ensure personal loyalty in various institutions and offices of government, including the judiciary.

Netanyahu has also dominated the political narrative in Israel by employing his connections in the Israeli media. According to articles of indictment in three separate corruption cases, Netanyahu has explicitly pressured Israeli media outlets to polish his image and discredit his opponents.[3] Political scientist Yascha Mounk affirms that Netanyahu has many of the characteristics of a model authoritarian populist: He suppresses dissenting views, attempts to take political control of public broadcasters, and has created a loyal propaganda outlet for himself via *Israel Hayom*, the free tabloid bankrolled by American billionaire Sheldon Adelson.

Furthermore, Netanyahu often employs conspiracy theories and fearmongering to secure his political authority, claiming a monopoly on maintaining Israeli security. Avraham Burg, a former speaker of the Knesset, notes that Netanyahu "seeds fears all over the place and then pops up around the corner and says, 'I have a solution for you.'" By employing this strategy Netanyahu has successfully thwarted opposition, including grassroot movements such as the 2011 "Tents Protest," the most significant protest movement in Israel's history, which critiqued the government's military and security spending.

Moreover, Netanyahu relentlessly incites violence against Palestinian citizens of Israel, depicting them as a Trojan horse, terrorists, and a fifth column within Israeli society. He has repeatedly described Arab voters as "heading to the polling stations in droves" to persuade Jewish citizens to vote for him by presenting himself as the leader who can stop the "Arab threat."

Netanyahu has systematically marginalized both his internal and external opposition.[4] By eliminating any competition within his party and building an internal network of loyal followers, he has been able to project himself as the only person capable of empowering the Likud Party, arguing that a genuine right wing would cease to exist without him. Netanyahu has concurrently besieged his opponents on the Zionist left, accusing them of being traitors, feeble, and Arab-loving, and has pushed through legislation to restrict the activities of left-wing human rights organizations – the only domestic institutions challenging Israel's most fundamental and egregious violations, most often perpetrated by Israeli settlers and the Israeli army in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Through this combination of political tools – expanding his monopoly on right-wing power, obstructing democratic practices, and capitalizing on the existential fears of Israeli Zionists – Netanyahu has recreated the typical model of one-man rule, paralleling the rise of populist authoritarian rulers elsewhere. However, since Netanyahu relies mostly on Mizrahi Jews as supporters, his model of strongman rule shares some similarities with models developed in the Middle East.[5]

In doing so Netanyahu has cultivated blind loyalty and the image of one-man leadership in the psyche of Israeli society, projecting himself as the only politician capable of protecting Israel and its interests through his far-reaching connections and charismatic personality.

The Israeli Right and the Religious-Secular Conflict

Netanyahu has enhanced the contradictory nature of Israel as both Jewish and democratic by favoring the Jewish over the democratic aspect of the state's identity. His strategy culminated in the enactment of the Nation-State Law, which has contributed to the religionization of Israeli political discourse and increased the religious characteristics of the Zionist right.

Indeed, Netanyahu projects Likud as the sole protector of Jewish interests by drawing a symmetrical alliance between the national right wing (presented historically by Likud) and the ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, Jews. In doing so, he has relied on three major forces: the Israeli nationalist right, the radical right, and what is described by Ehud Sprinzak as the "soft right." While the first two forces have traditionally been part of Israeli politics, the soft right – the key player in Netanyahu's political coalitions – is new and worth investigation.

The soft right is a loose coalition of ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazim, ultra-Orthodox Sephardim, and secular immigrants from the former Soviet Union. On the surface, it would seem that these groups would not even sit at the same table, and clashes do occur, particularly due to Netanyahu's urge to appease the religious bloc. However, the coalition is driven by a mutual animosity toward Arabs and the Israeli secular left.[6]

Through this union, the right has secured legislation that achieves an even greater presence of religion in Israeli public life, including tax breaks for Haredi Jews, continuing military service exemptions for Yeshiva students, and tolerance regarding daily practices, such as closing streets and public transportation on Saturdays and empowering the mandate of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, who has authority on personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, conversions, and determining who is Jewish. These policies escalated conflicts within the soft right and led last year to the collapse of Netanyahu's traditional coalition that had ensured that he and Likud have kept their hold on power since 2009.

In particular, in the April 2019 elections Netanyahu failed to reconcile the conflict between religious parties and Avigdor Lieberman, who, as a secular far-right leader, is positioning himself as an alternative to Netanyahu to lead the secular liberal right. At the heart of the conflict between the religious parties and Lieberman, who used to be two solid components of Netanyahu's coalition, was the issue of mandatory military service for Haredim. Besides being an essential

component of individual Israeli identity, military service in Israel is the prime signifier of membership in the Israeli civic community and a crucial determinant of the meaning of Israeli citizenship.[7] Israelis also consider military service a universal institution where political and ideological disputes are supposed to dissolve – an essential value for Israel's continued survival, given the demographic changes on the horizon.[8]

Netanyahu's agenda has disrupted the status quo established by David Ben-Gurion in 1947, which aimed to contain the religious-secular conflict in the future state. Under this policy, Haredi Jews became exempt from military service in 1952 despite the view that military service would serve as a melting pot for all Jewish people hailing from different origins and backgrounds. Ben-Gurion also refrained from writing a constitution for the state of Israel and avoided discussions thereof. Instead, he simply referred to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, explaining that avoiding specific internal conflicts was the best way to maintain internal peace.

Anger toward Haredi Jews, both from the secular right and left, has increased as a result of the military exemption. They are seen as a burden on the state not only because they refuse military service, but also because they receive special tax breaks while remaining disengaged from the labor market. Moreover, their strict and isolated way of life, not to mention their treatment of women, contrasts starkly with the liberal and open image of Israel exported abroad. Conversely, Haredi Jews see secular Jews as leading a decadent lifestyle in violation of Jewish laws, and whose mixing with other religions threatens the survival of Judaism itself.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu has blocked all attempts to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.[9] He has disregarded fundamental Palestinian demands and worked to make political and geographic changes on the ground by continuing to build settlements, securing American recognition of Israel's illegal annexation of

Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, and working closely with the Trump administration on its "Deal of the Century."

This policy of managing the conflict, which includes enhancing Palestinian-Israeli security coordination, has contributed to a strong feeling of stability in Israel, especially when the daily reality of Palestinians' lives under occupation continues to be entirely out of sight for most Israelis. As a result, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has long been absent from electoral platforms, and instead the Israeli public is concerned with the internal conflicts outlined above.

Israel is in fact witnessing a twofold internal conflict that transcends merely securing the required number of seats to form a coalition government. It is instead a conflict over the right wing's political representation and the nature of the state of Israel. Netanyahu succeeded in recent years in establishing his hegemony by polarizing internal conflicts within Israel's right wing through emphasizing common enemies. But this has now reached the point of a direct clash, made clear by Lieberman's refusal to join Netanyahu's coalition without Netanyahu making concessions on the issue of religious military service exemptions.

Netanyahu's policies of restructuring the right wing, emphasizing Jewishness over democracy, and repositioning conflicts in Israel have created new dynamics, changes, and coalitions in Israeli politics. Under these circumstances, Netanyahu mastered the political game and knew how to benefit from it until the April 2019 election, when he failed to form a government. This was the point at which his marathon for political survival began.

Netanyahu Survives Again

Netanyahu is now waging a fierce personal war against his political opponents, deriving power from his constituency, charismatic personality, and media influence. Like a typical populist, he refuses to withdraw or believe he could lose.

According to Mounk, only a minority of populists who are elected leave office through free and fair elections. They often make their countries more corrupt, rewrite the constitution to give themselves more power, and violate fundamental civil and political rights. This is what Netanyahu has been doing for years by attacking significant institutions in Israel and claiming to be a victim of a liberal media and judicial system.

Netanyahu's survival strategy has always been about personalizing politics by emphasizing the question of the proper leader that should head Israel. If the real challenge in the first two elections lay in how to form a government by bridging the rift that Netanyahu's policies have aggravated for years within the right bloc and persuading all parties, especially Lieberman, to come on board, in the third election, thanks to Blue and White leader Benny Gantz's hesitation and COVID-19, Netanyahu managed to transfer the question from *how* to *who* should form a government under these circumstances.

Netanyahu is doing what he does best: managing crises and portraying himself as Israel's sole savior. Without a doubt, the coronavirus pandemic has played into Netanyahu's hands. He has led the nation's efforts to contain the virus since the beginning and has accused his opponents of hampering the cause by continuing to struggle over the formation of the government. By waving the flag of national unity and collective interest in a time of trouble, Netanyahu convinced Gantz and the Israeli public that an emergency national government is crucial for defeating the virus. In doing so, he succeeded in dismantling Blue and White and found a way to stay in office.

Netanyahu signed a power-sharing agreement that ensures his position as prime minister for a further 18 months in a national emergency government. The government agreement also gives Netanyahu – who is still facing trial on charges of fraud, breach of trust, and accepting bribes – influence over the appointments of judges and legal officials. According to the agreement, both parties approve

key appointments, including the attorney general and the state prosecutor, granting Netanyahu veto power over the officials who will determine his fate in the courts.

This conflict of interest does not seem to affect Netanyahu, who still enjoys extensive backing, to the point that his supporters staged demonstrations and accused the Israeli judiciary of corruption and deliberately targeting him. While Netanyahu's opponents hoped that the Supreme Court would declare his mandate illegal because of his criminal indictment, this scenario did not play out as they had hoped: The court refused to bar Netanyahu from forming a government and declined to block the power-sharing agreement with Gantz.

Netanyahu's political survival has taken a toll on Israeli democracy and its institutions. Yet the extent to which populists manage to damage democratic institutions depends on their centralization of power. It can be argued that since the Israeli prime minister is nearly always dependent on the support of coalition partners, there are hypothetically still some checks on authoritarianism in Israel not found in other states. However, recent developments challenge this assumption: The coalition of the three former Likud members who split from the party and reached the Knesset through other parties with Blue and White ensures Netanyahu a coalition of 61 members in a broader national government. This means that Netanyahu is establishing his government within the national unity government and bolstering his own supremacy in the name of consensus. Even if Gantz intends to break with the government, it would not affect its stability and status as a mechanism of governing.

In a national unity government, Netanyahu's challenge is not related only to remaining in power; rather, it is about remaining and dominating – and this is what he has understood from the beginning. Forming a large government requires trying to satisfy everyone by distributing portfolios. This makes for internal clashes and challenges Netanyahu's traditional allies in their struggle to keep their power

while Netanyahu attempts to also keep his opponents close.

On the surface, the fact that Netanyahu is entering his fourth consecutive term – his fifth overall – burnishes his reputation as a political wizard and unbeatable survivor. Yet understanding his survival also means exposing the internal dynamics and hidden power structures in Israeli politics. Moreover, Netanyahu would not be able to survive without the support of many segments of Israeli society and the success of his highly curated populist image as the "father of the nation" and a "strong leader" – an identity he has propagated himself. Netanyahu has apparently won the battle, but only against Israel's fragile democratic values and institutions.

1. This piece is part of Al-Shabaka's Policy Circle on Palestinian Leadership and Accountability. An Al-Shabaka policy circle is a specific methodology to engage a group of analysts in longer-term study and reflection on an issue of key importance to the Palestinian people.
2. *To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.*
3. The cases include Case 4000, in which Netanyahu allegedly conducted a "give and take" agreement with the Bezeq telecommunications company and Israeli Walla website to receive favorable coverage, as well as Case 3000, in which Netanyahu allegedly attempted to control the political content of *Yedioth Ahronoth*, the highest selling and circulating Israeli daily newspaper with a popular website.
4. *Netanyahu accomplished this marginalization after being elected party chairman in 1992 by initiating organizational change within Likud. He altered the internal election system, introducing primaries to weaken both the Central Committee and political rivals. The Central Committee previously had elected most party positions, but under Netanyahu the party chairman nominated members to key administration roles. Netanyahu also created two new bodies within the party – the party bureau and the party management – and appointed their members as well. The Likud Party structure became more centralized under Netanyahu's leadership from 1993 to 1996 and lost its*

factional nature; instead, one dominant coalition ruled.

5. Historically, Herut (Likud today) was an anti-elitist movement directed against Mapai and its hegemonic institutions (such as the Histadrut and the Kibbutz movement) that played a key role in the marginalization of the Mizrahim, who became a solid electoral bloc for Likud. According to Nissim Mizrachi, Mizrahi Jews' political behavior is similar to a family structure; Hisham Sharabi also explained politics in the Arab world and collective societies in this way. In Mizrachi's words, "Data show that many of these people are confident that the person at the top of the political pyramid is working for their collective good. Maybe it's not going well for him, but they don't suspect him of acting out of motives that are not to their benefit."
6. Despite their secularism and animosity toward the ultra-Orthodox, most Russian Israelis cannot tolerate the rhetoric of the Israeli left because of their memories of the Soviet Union; meanwhile, the ultra-Orthodox oppose the secularity of the Israeli left.
7. *Israel is perhaps the only country in which "citizenship" is differentiated from "nationality;" the meaning of citizenship is different than obtaining citizenship (a passport).*
8. *According to the Israel Democracy Institution 2019 statistical report on ultra-Orthodox society in Israel, the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel today numbers 1,125,000 – 12% of Israel's population – and is growing at a higher rate than the rest of Israel's population.*
9. Unwilling to allow for meaningful Palestinian sovereignty in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, Netanyahu follows the conflict management approach. This approach was accelerated by the Second Intifada, but is rooted in Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol's "decision not to decide" in the aftermath of the 1967 war.

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