

LFI Focus: Israel heads to the polls (again)



After an unprecedented political stalemate, Israel will go to the polls on 17 September – less than six months after Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to win April’s general election.

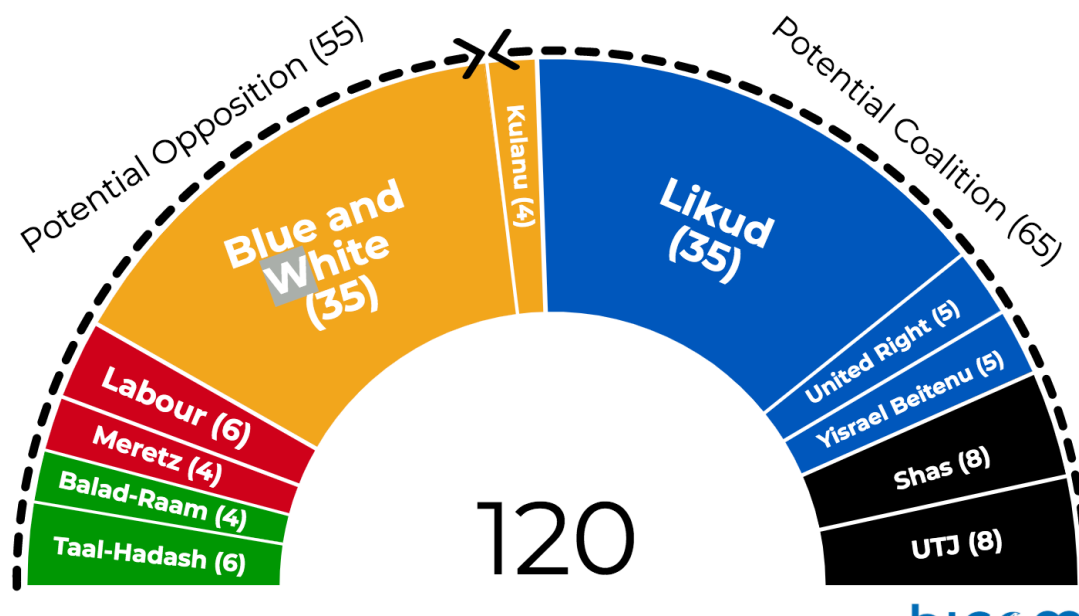
The prime minister’s inability to negotiate a coalition deal is the first time in Israeli history that an election has not resulted in the formation of a government. In the wake of April’s elections, Netanyahu had declared a “great victory” which set him up for an historic fifth term in office and a place in the history books as Israel’s longest-serving leader.

Netanyahu was invited by President Reuven Rivlin to form a government in the wake of the elections after the leaders of parties with a majority of seats in the Israeli parliament recommended he should become prime minister. He had already been granted one extension to the original 28-day deadline.

How did we get here?

On 29 May, the Knesset voted by 74 to 45 to dissolve itself minutes before the midnight deadline for Netanyahu to seal a coalition deal. The manoeuvre was designed by the ruling Likud party to prevent Rivlin inviting opposition leader Benny Gantz from attempting to form a government.

Although Gantz's centrist Blue and White alliance fought Likud to a virtual draw in April – with each party winning 35 seats and 26 percent of the vote – the Knesset arithmetic suggested that the former IDF general would have been unable to cobble together a majority coalition. The right-wing parties, and their ultra-Orthodox allies, won 65 of 120 seats in April, while the centre-left and Arab parties secured 55 seats.



Green – Arab | Red – left-wing | Orange – centrist | Blue – right-wing | Black – ultra-Orthodox

As Dr Einat Wilf, a former Labor MK, explains: “In the Israeli system, the prime minister is not the person who has the most votes, but the person who has the most friends – and this time around, Netanyahu did not have enough parties which were willing to come together and overcome their differences to forge a coalition supporting his prime ministership.”

Netanyahu's failure stemmed from a dispute between three of the parties he needed to secure a Knesset majority: on the one hand, the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties, and, on the other, former defence minister Avigdor Liberman's right-wing nationalist Yisrael Beitenu party. The dispute centred around a bill which would tighten the exemption ultra-Orthodox young men have from performing national service. The law would raise over the next decade the proportion of Haredi youth conscripted into the military from 10 to 20 percent. Shas and UTJ, who together hold 16 seats in the Knesset, demanded that Netanyahu water down the bill, which received its first reading last year.

However, Liberman insisted the measure proceed unamended. His party, whose political base is formed by Russian immigrants to Israel, is fiercely secular. Without the support of both Liberman, whose party had five seats after April's elections, and the ultra-Orthodox parties, Netanyahu didn't have the numbers to form a government.

Following the Knesset vote and the triggering of new elections, Netanyahu and Liberman have traded insults. Liberman accused Likud of “a complete surrender ... to the ultra-Orthodox. We will not be partners in a government of Jewish law”. The prime minister said

that Liberman had “dragged the country to unnecessary elections due to his own political ego”. He later accused his hawkish former defence minister of being “a part of the left” who had “prevented the forming of a right-wing government”.

The leftist charge – a frequent election-time insult deployed by Netanyahu – will be a hard one to stick on Liberman. Contrasting the prime minister’s weekend home among Israel’s wealthy elite with his own in a West Bank settlement, the Yisrael Beitenu leader mockingly responded: “The man from Caesarea accuses the man from Nokdim of being a leftist.”

Sometime allies and frequent rivals, Liberman and Netanyahu have a long and complicated history. As a member of Likud, the former once served as the latter’s political aide and director-general of the prime minister’s office. Although Liberman later split from his former patron to form Yisrael Beitenu, he has served in Netanyahu’s governments as both foreign and defence minister but the two have often had a fractious relationship. Late last year, Liberman quit as defence minister, accusing Netanyahu of weakness in tackling the threat of Hamas terrorism. His resignation, and the withdrawal of his party from the government, helped to destabilise the coalition, eventually leading to elections being called for April (they were not originally scheduled until the autumn). While they have previously fallen out and then gone on to patch up their differences, the break between the two men now appears irreparable. Both have indicated they will never be partners in government again, with Netanyahu branding Liberman “a serial saboteur of right-wing governments”.

Bibi’s ultra-Orthodox conundrum

Liberman claims that his refusal to back down over the conscription bill was a “matter of principle”. Certainly, Yisrael Beitenu has campaigned for more than a decade to ensure that more ultra-Orthodox young men serve in the military. The issue highlights perhaps the major cleavage in Israeli politics. As Miriam Berger [notes](#) in the Washington Post: “While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often described as the struggle shaping Israel, tension between religious and secular (or less religious) Jewish Israelis is the other major factor defining the modern Jewish state.”

Liberman draws his support from the one in 10 Israelis who, like him, were born in the former Soviet Union or were born in Israel to two Russian-speaking parents. Many of these “Russian” Israelis take a particularly dim view of the power and influence wielded by the political and religious leadership of the Haredim having had their Jewishness called into question by the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate.

But Liberman is capitalising on a tension which runs far beyond Israelis who migrated from Russia. As pollster and political strategist Dahlia Scheindlin [argues](#): “The dividing line between Israelis on issues of religion and state doesn’t totally run in parallel to the left-right dividing line on issues of diplomacy and security. There are many right-wingers who are less supportive of religious legislation”.

Any increase in the salience of such issues during the election campaign poses a particular challenge to Netanyahu. The ultra-Orthodox parties were at one time not closely aligned with the political right; instead, they took a pragmatic approach of siding with Labor or Likud according to what concessions for their voters could be wrung from their prospective suitors.

Netanyahu, however, has bound them tight to his party, and they have been key to his political staying-power. “The matter of principle [Lieberman] chose to base his challenge on threatens the power structure that has kept Netanyahu’s party ... in power,” suggests Anshel Pfeffer. “In making it a wedge issue, Lieberman has put in question the political alliance between the right-wing and religious camps ... gambling that there are enough right-wingers fed up with the alliance who will redraw the map of Israeli politics, making him the new kingmaker with the power to unseat Netanyahu.”

Lieberman, who has long coveted the role of leader of the right in the post-Netanyahu era, will be looking to seize and exploit this potential opportunity.

Lieberman may have chosen his moment well. He has rightly sensed that, despite his apparent win in April, Netanyahu may now be politically vulnerable. The prime minister is due in court in October for a pre-indictment hearing on corruption charges. Since the elections, Netanyahu and his allies have engaged in various attempts as a part of the coalition negotiations to provide him with immunity and restrict the power of the courts to stop them from doing so. The dissolution of the Knesset will now leave Netanyahu without the means to give himself the protection from state prosecutors he’s evidently been desperate to achieve.

Reshaping the political landscape

Netanyahu’s apparent desperation to avoid elections was apparent in last-ditch efforts ahead of the Knesset dissolution vote to substitute a deal with Lieberman for one with Labor. The proposed offer, overwhelmingly rejected by Labor MKs, would have seen the party receive three top ministerial posts, including the Finance Ministry. Labor chair Avi Gabbay said it was also promised a veto on “any anti-democratic legislation”. Gabbay, who came under intense pressure to quit following the party’s poor performance in April’s elections, has announced that Labor will hold a primary to pick its next leader on 2 July. He has announced he won’t stand for re-election.

Former Labor leader Amir Peretz has said he will stand, as will two popular young MKs, Stav Shaffir and Itzik Shmuli. There are reports that the former senior IDF general Yair Golan is also considering joining the race. So, too, apparently is former prime minister Ehud Barak.

However, more fundamental changes may be on the horizon for Labor, with Gabbay suggesting that it should merge with either Blue and White or the left-wing Meretz party.

Gabbay’s talk of such a merger reflects the fact that early surveys suggest that the new elections may produce the same deadlock which resulted from April’s poll. These indicate that right-wing parties (including the ultra-Orthodox) would win between 57-58 seats, with the centre, left and Arab parties on 54. Lieberman, whose party has jumped from five to nine seats, would thus hold the balance of power. However, he’s ruled out going into government with either Netanyahu or Gantz.

But it is not just Labor’s future that may shake-up the political landscape. Already, the centre-right Kulanu party of finance minister Moshe Kahlon has merged with Likud. Netanyahu will hope to bolster Likud’s position by picking up the 152,000 voters who backed

Kulanu in April, but some commentators believe that this strategy may backfire. “If Kahlon’s soft-right voters ... desert Likud – after all, they refused to vote for Netanyahu in April – and defect to the chief Israeli opposition Blue and White party, which spent much of its campaign trying to woo them, it could tip the balance in the Knesset away from Netanyahu. But if these voters stick with Kahlon under Bibi, they could ensure the latter’s return to power,” Yair Rosenberg argues.

Other mergers may also affect the numbers. Will, for instance, the Arab-Israeli vote be split between two rival blocs – the left-nationalist Hadash-Ta’al and Islamist Ra’am-Balad – once again or, as in 2015, will a Joint List be formed? The collapse of the Joint List earlier this year appears to have depressed the turnout among Arab-Israeli voters. It also saw the Joint List’s 13 Knesset seats drop to a combined 10 seats for the two alliances. The fact that the Arab parties voted alongside Netanyahu for a dissolution indicates that they’re thinking of rebuilding bridges burnt before April’s elections and thus trying to regain lost ground.

Finally, former ministers Ayelet Shaked and Naftali Bennett bolted the right-wing pro-settler Jewish Home party to form the New Right ahead of April’s elections. Their gamble failed spectacularly and the pair lost their Knesset seats as the New Right narrowly fell below the 3.25 percent popular vote threshold required for parties to enter the Israeli parliament. Bennett has said he will stand again for the New Right, while there have been reports that Likud was wooing Shaked (an effort rumoured to have been scuppered by the influential Sara Netanyahu). Either way, it appears possible the New Right may, in fact, end up running on a joint slate with the Union of Right-wing parties – an alliance formed between the Jewish Home, the National Union and the far-right Otzma Yehudit controversially brokered by Netanyahu – which managed to win five seats in April. Obstacles to a deal include Bennett’s purported wariness about running with Otzma Yehudit and his opposition to National Union leader Bezalel Smotrich’s desire to “restore the Torah justice system”.

Would such a merger be good news for Netanyahu? On paper, it might be helpful. Over 250,000 Israelis cast “wasted” votes in April, by backing two parties – the New Right and the far-right, libertarian Zehut party of Moshe Feiglin – which failed to win seats in the Knesset. However, like Liberman, Bennett’s history with Netanyahu is a chequered one. The two men were once close allies: Bennett served as the prime minister’s chief of staff before going it alone and forming the Jewish Home party. Despite Jewish Home serving in each of Netanyahu’s coalitions since 2013, Bennett, again like Liberman, aspires to lead the right once the prime minister leaves the political stage. Netanyahu’s decision to abruptly fire Bennett and Shaked from their cabinet posts shortly after the elections were called upped the tensions. Pointedly, Bennett has refused to answer reporters’ questions as to whether he would back Netanyahu to remain prime minister after September’s elections.

This underlines a potentially critical shift since Israelis voted two months ago. Going into the April poll, the right was united with key players such as Bennett and Liberman pledging to support Netanyahu over Gantz after the elections. But, as David Horowitz, editor of the Times of Israel, now puts it: “Like Liberman, Bennett is a thoroughly disgruntled former Netanyahu staffer and ally. If he does make it back to the Knesset in September, it is not impossible that Bennett would sit in a Netanyahu-led coalition. But it is certain he would also explore any other potential avenues.” This, together with the breach between Yisrael

Beitenu and the ultra-Orthodox parties, could make Netanyahu's path to forming a coalition after September's elections even narrower than it was after the country last voted.

A weakened Netanyahu?

Thus, despite his apparent triumph in April, Netanyahu enters the election campaign fighting for his political life. He is not without considerable assets. The prime minister remains popular with the Likud rank and file and the party has never removed a leader. Early polls don't suggest any significant slippage in Likud's support, and the right bloc – though now less pliant to Netanyahu's commands – appears stronger than that of the centre-left and Arab parties.

The once-mighty Labor party is still coming to terms with the drubbing it received in April. The centrist Blue and White opposition has said it will retain the rotation agreement which many believe cost it support at the last general election. Under its terms, Gantz would serve as prime minister for the first half of any government before handing the reins to Yair Lapid, whose Yesh Atid party merged with the former IDF chief's short-lived Israel Resilience party to form Blue and White.

On the other hand, Netanyahu's failed last-minute attempts to bring Labor and Blue and White MKs into his government must surely diminish the electoral potency of the prime minister's relentless attacks during the previous campaign on the two parties as weak and dangerous leftists who would compromise Israel's security and should be allowed nowhere near the country's government.

The failure of the opposition parties to unseat Netanyahu in April was, in part, due to the failure of Blue and White to attract moderate centre-right voters and ending up instead simply taking votes from Labor. However, there is, perhaps, the possibility that some of these voters might switch from the right to the centre in September. In the run-up to April's elections, Netanyahu said he would not push legislation that might help him evade prosecution in the pending corruption cases. However, no sooner had he seemingly been re-elected than he embarked on just such an endeavour. As Horowitz argues: "It is unclear how public attitudes to Netanyahu might be affected by the realisation that he planned to remake the checks and balances at the heart of Israeli democracy – and to do so ... because of his personal legal plight rather than the national interest."

Less than six months will have passed between the two elections of 2019, but the choices before the Israeli electorate – though familiar in many regards – will inevitably have a multitude of new elements which may yet dramatically affect the eventual outcome.