

A troubling new coalition in Israel

How will Netanyahu and his new allies govern? And what will become of the Israeli left?

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue



A Likud party supporter holds a poster of the party's head and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as he delivers an election campaign in Migdal Haemek, northern Israel, Sunday, Oct. 23, 2022. (AP Photo/Ariel Schalit)

A few weeks before Israel's elections, I attended a meeting in Jerusalem organized by the left-wing religious group Oz VeShalom. A panel addressing the small, liberal audience was comprised of representatives of five political parties, ranging from the radical left Meretz party to the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party. Each spoke for a given time, and then they argued among themselves about the best way to run the

country.

One theme engaged them all: the method by which to achieve peace. No one raised the possibility that there is no prospect of peace in this region, not now nor in the foreseeable future. Neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians are prepared to give up their claims to land—it's in their DNA. The fact that these senior party representatives, most of them members of the Knesset, could not or would not articulate this simple truth suggested that their outlook is based on an illusion or a lie. Either they didn't see this existential reality or they were hiding from it—afraid, perhaps, that it would harm their chances at the polls.

Now the elections have taken place. They were won not by any of the parties to this earlier debate but by the most right-wing groups ever to emerge as legitimate representatives of the people. The coalition is led by former and future prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who is mired in at least three different legal battles—and peopled by parties (the Religious Zionists, Jewish Power, and Shas) whose platforms include racist views of Palestinians and a promise to change the judiciary in order to undermine the accusations against Netanyahu.

These parties came to such power partly because of the political system that allowed them to run and partly because of the absence of a clear opposition to their emerging presence. Itamar Ben-Gvir, the leader of Otzma Yehudit, was inspired by the late Meir Kahane, whose own party, Kach, was banned by the Knesset in the 1980s because of its racist policies. How its reappearance, in the person of Ben-Gvir, was allowed back in these elections is still an open question.

Israel offers voters more than 40 parties to choose from—a list of options that has no parallel in the world of democracies. Most of these parties do not make the cut on polling day. This means that many thousands of votes are wasted that could have been channeled to the larger, more established parties. Many of these small parties tend toward left-leaning views, so the loss is felt more on the left than on the right.

Everyone seems to agree that the system—a hangover from the founding of the state in 1948—is badly in need of repair. For example, if I have a local problem that can be dealt with only by government assistance, to whom do I turn? In Great Britain or the United States, I would turn to my local representative. But in Israel there is no such thing. Everything is decided by a party.

Members of the Knesset arrive there through their party. Unlike in other democracies, where members of the government first have to prove themselves by serving the local population, in Israel it is sufficient to join a party and work to further its particular aims. Once in power the party typically becomes almost indifferent to its supporters. It often feels as though the members of the Knesset are living on a different planet from the citizens that voted them in. There seems to be one set of rules for them and another for everyone else.

Take Netanyahu's legal troubles. In other democracies he would have done the right thing and resigned, even if only temporarily. But here he is back in control of the country—only half of which voted for his party and its followers. (He and his supporters received 50 percent of the votes; the opposition scored 49 percent.) A similar indictment could be made against Aryeh Deri, who has served time in prison for fraud. The Israeli system allowed him, after a certain time, to return to serve the community that he cheated so brazenly beforehand. If given the option of a senior post, Deri has stated that his preference is as minister of finance!

Netanyahu has publicly stated that he wants his trial to continue. He could not do otherwise. Any attempt to wipe his slate clean through political means would point directly to an admission of guilt. But he does not need to worry since his newest coalition partners, Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich of the Religious Zionist Party, have already said that they will banish the laws that keep Netanyahu under legal censure. It is good to have friends in the right place and at the right time.

As for the left-wing and centrist parties, their failures are mainly of their own making. Their public, internecine squabbling led to their running as separate parties rather than as a united front. The left-wing Meretz failed to pass the minimum quota of votes and thus was left outside the Knesset for the first time in more than 30 years. Similarly, the Arab parties had a threefold split that led to a critical loss of seats. This was especially painful since the previous government, under the guidance of right-wing leader Naftali Bennett, introduced an Arab party into the government for the first time ever. Arab Israelis comprise 20 percent of the overall population.

It is too early to say how the new government will act. World reaction has been critical of the inclusion of such right-wingers as Smotrich and Ben-Gvir. US president Joe Biden has warned Netanyahu against following their pitch. But how is Netanyahu to avoid this, since his government is dependent on their support?

It will be interesting to see how this new coalition—ultra-Orthodox, anti-Zionist parties; the nationalistic religious Zionists; the right-wing Likud party of Netanyahu—will deal with realpolitik issues such as the nuclear arms deal with Iran, the relationship with the United States and American Jewry (most of whom are not inclined to the nationalistic views of Smotrich and Ben-Gvir), and of course the Palestinian and Arab Israeli populations.

For the moment, however, they are more concerned with internal, local issues, such as the overhaul of the education system and a more stringent public observance of the sabbath day. It is possible, of course, that the deep divide between the Orthodox pro- and anti-Zionist groups will prevent them from passing any new law, a weakness that the politically skillful Netanyahu is sure to exploit.

One result of the elections is the apparent fading away of the left-leaning parties. They campaigned on a negative platform—against Netanyahu—without presenting an effective program of their own. They thus left the field wide open for ideologically fueled groups that successfully campaigned as the representatives of social solidarity, security, tradition, Judaism, and so on. The fact that they publicly thanked God for bringing them victory shows the dangers of connecting religion and politics. Their suggestion is that any issue proposed by these God-intoxicated men (there are almost no women in their ranks) will have the stamp of divine approval.

David Rosen, a fully committed Orthodox rabbi with strong liberal tendencies, recently observed, “There would have to be a real disaster before the Israeli population wakes up.” It seems to many Israelis that this disaster has just happened.