

Elections in Israel

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This week Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fired two cabinet ministers and called for new elections.

What happens in Israel affects us. So this morning I would like to clarify what is going on in the government of Israel and think together about implications for Israel's future.

Journalists are taught that their stories should answer five questions: who, what, when, where and why.

The when and where are easy. Netanyahu made his announcement on Tuesday evening, December 2, in Jerusalem. The next day, Wednesday, December 3, Israel's parliament, the Knesset, by a unanimous vote agreed to dissolve in order to have a new election. That election has been scheduled to take place on March 17, 2015.

The harder questions to answer are who, what and why. These are harder because the Israeli government and its electoral process are complicated, involving many participants with often sharply different goals and positions.

Let's begin with who, namely, who are the party leaders and what parties do they represent?

I am distributing a document that lists all the political parties in the Knesset. On the front page, in bold, I've listed the five parties who have been in the ruling coalition since the last election, which took place last year. There are 120 seats in the Knesset, so a majority is 61. These five parties have 68 seats, a comfortable majority. On the reverse of the document, just for your information, I've listed the remaining eight political parties, the ones that are not part of the ruling coalition. Among them they have a total of 52 seats.

In elections in Israel the voters do not vote for individual candidates, the way we do here. Instead, voters vote for parties. Each party holds its own internal elections to determine who will represent the party in the Knesset. Those names are publicized, and they are listed in order of preference. So, for example, if a party listed 25 names in the 2013 election, and then won ten percent of the vote in the election, that party would be entitled to ten percent of the Knesset seats. In this example it would have twelve seats, so twelve of its members on the publicized list would represent that party in the Knesset.

So how is a government formed? After the election, the President of Israel asks the head of one of the parties to form a government by assembling a coalition that adds up to at least 61 seats. In the last election Netanyahu had that role. He then invited the other four parties that you see listed to join with him in the ruling coalition.

[WHEN WE DISCUSSED THIS IN THE SYNAGOGUE, I STOPPED HERE TO TAKE QUESTIONS, THEN VOLUNTEERS READ ALOUD THE INFORMATION ON THE FIVE COALITION PARTIES: NAME OF PARTY IN HEBREW AND IN ENGLISH, LEADER, NUMBER OF SEATS, AND POSITION.]

Three of these parties have positions that I would call conservative or even right-wing: HaLikud, HaBayit HaYehudi, and Yisrael Beiteinu. The other two are liberal or left-wing: Yesh Atid and Hatnua.

Because these factions have basic disagreements with each other, there have often been disputes among them, including public criticisms by one leader against another.

The sharpest criticism in recent weeks concerned a proposal to adopt a law that identified Israel as a Jewish state. Netanyahu favors that law. But Lapid and Livni, who are more liberal, oppose it.

Livni is the Minister of Justice. In that role she chairs a committee that considers draft legislation before the legislation is filed in the Knesset. Her committee had scheduled a vote on the law that she opposes. As a result, Livni canceled the vote and spoke out against the bill. She said, "The Zionists fought for Israel to be a Jewish and democratic state. Israel has equality for all its citizens. I oppose a democratic state that is not Jewish just as I would oppose a Jewish state that is not democratic."

She said that she postponed deliberations on the bill because it would change Israel's status as a state with equal rights for all its citizens.

One provision in the draft bill to which she objected would make Hebrew the official language of Israel. That's a change from current law. Arabic has been an official language in Israel since before 1948. A ruling in 1922 under the British mandate created three official languages: English, Hebrew and Arabic. In 1948 Israel adopted that rule but amended it so that English was no longer an official language. Under the proposed law that Netanyahu supports and Livni opposes, Hebrew would be the only official language.

Another problematic provision in the draft states that "the holy sites shall be protected against desecration and all other damage and against anything that would interfere with freedom of access of religious groups to places holy to them or to their sensibilities regarding said holy sites." This provision could exacerbate the recent violence attributed to the possibility that Jews might pray on the Temple Mount.

In recent days there have been some changes regarding this proposed law. When I last checked, there were four different versions, all slightly different. The plan was to approve all four as drafts, then assign those drafts to a committee to come up with a single version.

Nevertheless, Livni's public objection to the law infuriated Netanyahu, because he supports it and she is part of the ruling coalition. He believes that therefore she should not disagree with him in public.

On Tuesday he issued a press release announcing the firing of both Livni and Lapid. The statement said:

In recent weeks, ministers Lapid and Livni attacked harshly the government I head. I will no longer tolerate an opposition within the government. I will not tolerate ministers who, from within the government, attack government policies and the person who leads the government.

One commentator on Israeli politics I find most reliable is Rabbi Daniel Gordis. Here is his analysis of these events:

In his speech on Tuesday night, Netanyahu blamed Lapid and Livni for undermining him throughout the 22 months that this government has been in office, and then, even more strangely, blamed the electorate. He essentially said if more of the electorate had voted for him, he wouldn't have had to form a government with individuals who oppose him so strongly.

But every Israeli government in history has been a coalition, and many have been rocky, so what Netanyahu was complaining about wasn't clear to anyone. He looked even more hallucinatory when he insisted that while this government has been difficult to manage, the government that preceded it was "one of the best and most stable" in Israel's history.

That is obvious balderdash. It was during that government that massive social protests over the cost of living erupted in the streets of Tel Aviv. Almost 40 ministers and vice-ministers -- the largest cabinet in Israel's history -- had to be appointed to keep warring party factions satisfied (at a high cost to the Israeli electorate). The 2013 election results were a clear sign that Israelis were fed up.

Those on the right voted for Naftali Bennett, who gave Netanyahu a surprisingly strong run for his money. A reawakened socially-conscious center-left gave Lapid's party an astonishing 19 seats in the Knesset. That is why Netanyahu had to appoint them. The electorate had made no mistake -- it punished Netanyahu intentionally.

It's been a precipitous fall from grace for Netanyahu. During this summer's war with Hamas his approval rating ran as high as 82 percent; it's now down to 38 percent. No one believes that Netanyahu was forced to fire Livni and Lapid because they were undermining him. After all, he did not fire Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who during this summer's war relentlessly criticized him for not reconquering all of Gaza, or Bennett, who demanded that the Israeli Defense Forces press on until Hamas was completely disarmed. The prime minister fired his centrist ministers, not those on the right -- a clear indication of which way he thinks the wind is blowing.

This move rightward will probably continue.

It is too early to make confident predictions about the composition of Israel's government after the elections next March. There has been one poll result, however, that suggests Netanyahu may not have as easy a time as he seemed to think a few days ago.

The poll was conducted on behalf of [The Jerusalem Post](#). The most significant finding was that 60% of Israelis do not want Netanyahu as Prime Minister.

The poll, taken on Wednesday among 500 respondents representing a statistical sample of the adult population, indicated that the election could end up being close. It has been assumed that Netanyahu cannot be defeated. That assumption may be incorrect.

The poll asked respondents whether they want Netanyahu to remain prime minister after the vote. Sixty percent said no, 34% said yes, and 6% did not know.

Opposition leader Isaac Herzog of Labor was almost tied with Netanyahu in the poll, with 44% saying they would prefer him, compared to 45% for Netanyahu and 11% who did not know.

A different poll this week predicted that Likud would win 30 Knesset seats. Two other polls said it would win 22. But the Jerusalem Post poll concluded that Netanyahu's party would win only 21, just three more than Bayit Yehudi's 18.

The poll also found significant dissatisfaction with both the social and security situation in Israel. The results said that 64% of respondents believe the country's socioeconomic situation has gotten worse under the outgoing government and 58% think the security situation has worsened.

[WE CONCLUDED THE DISCUSSION WITH ANOTHER Q & A SESSION]

[AT THE END OF THE SERVICE I OFFERED THIS PRAYER]:

Ribono shel Olam, we are fortunate, despite all the contentiousness in our own national government, that we live in a land dedicated ultimately to democracy, a country where we are not overwhelmed by a system too complex to comprehend and where most of us, most of the time, can feel more secure than, sadly, a great many people who live in other lands. We hope for the day when all who have mourned for losses in Israel will weep no more, a time when none shall injure and none shall destroy in all Your holy mountain and the sound of violence shall no more be heard in Your land. For this we all say, Amen. Shabbat Shalom.