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## Israeli Politics Ahead of the Repeat of Parliamentary Elections

Michał Wojnarowicz

*Ruling party Likud remains the front-runner in the 17 September elections. However, its leader, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has less chance to form a government than after the last vote in April. Polls show both the current right-wing coalition and the opposition dead even. If none of the blocs obtains a coalition majority, the establishment of a national unity government by the largest parties might be a way out of the political deadlock.*

**The Parties Ahead of the Elections.** Repeating the elections has not changed the electorate's preferences in Israel, although ballot fatigue may adversely affect turnout (it was 68.5% in April). The race is led by the ruling Likud and the opposition right-centrist alliance Blue and White, headed by Benjamin Gantz and Yair Lapid. Polls indicate that each grouping can win around 30 seats in the 120-seat Knesset. Support increased for Avigdor Lieberman's party, Israel Our Home. The party, currently holding five seats, might double its results from April, even though it led to the break-up of the coalition talks in May, contributing to the election re-run. Religious orthodox parties United Torah Judaism and Shas note stable support (7–8 seats).

Weak results in the April vote and the possibility of not crossing the electoral threshold (3.25%) prompted smaller parties to consolidate and change leadership (e.g., the Labour Party). Centrist Kulanu merged with Likud. The merger of the Union of the Right-Wing Parties with the New Right party strengthened the nationalist-religious bloc. This coalition named Yamina (Heb.: *Right*; led by the popular Ayelet Shaked) can get about 10 seats in the Knesset. A similar result, thanks to the expected mobilisation of their constituents, can be achieved by Arab parties, which have re-established their electoral alliance—The Joint List. The Labour Party formed a list with the social-centrist Geshet, which failed to cross the election threshold in April. A new political force is the Democratic Camp, created by the Israel Democratic Party (formed by former PM Ehud Barak), the social-democratic Meretz, and the Green Movement. However, the consolidation on the left has not led to a significant increase in support in the polls, with both lists projected to win 5–7 seats in the Knesset. The outflow of votes from smaller parties to the largest ones (likely because of an intensive push by the parties on election day) is also probable, as was the case in the April elections.

In the previous elections, about 240,000 votes were cast for parties that did not cross the electoral threshold, including potential Likud coalition partners (e.g., the New Right). Hence, to avoid “wasting” right-wing electorate votes, Netanyahu convinced smaller parties to withdraw. He managed to persuade—in exchange for the liberalisation of the medical marijuana market and a ministerial portfolio in the future government—the libertarian Zehut to drop out. Similar actions failed to convince the Otzma Yehudit party to exit. It represents radical settlers and could reach about 3% support.

**Campaign Topics.** As in previous elections, Netanyahu and his policies are the main reference point for both the coalition party and the opposition. The campaigns have focused on personnel issues, especially

corruption charges against the PM (the next stage of the legal proceedings will take place in October). The government's initiative to install cameras at polling stations, officially to combat supposed fraud in a prior election, also aroused controversy and is viewed in a broader context of Likud undermining confidence in voting. Other internal topics include limiting the role of religious institutions in the public sphere, healthcare, and the status of minorities and disadvantaged citizens (the Arab population, Ethiopian Jews).

Netanyahu's diplomatic activity and relations with important world leaders also have played an important role in Likud's election coverage. U.S.-Israel relations are particularly resonant, especially after Israel banned Democratic Congresswomen Rashid Tlaib and Ilhan Omar from entering the country ostensibly for their support for the pro-Palestinian "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions" (BDS) movement. The opposition criticized this decision as an act of submission by the prime minister to the Trump administration. Benefiting Netanyahu though was the postponement of the publication of the political portion of the U.S. Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

Security is traditionally an important topic in campaigns, especially in the face of the escalating conflict with Iran (which includes Israeli airstrikes on targets in Syria and Iraq and exchanges of fire with Hezbollah) and the situation in the Palestinian territories. The opposition criticized as too subdued the Netanyahu government's policy towards Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The most important parties also made far-reaching declarations regarding the future of the Israeli presence in the West Bank. Netanyahu announced the annexation of the Jordan Valley after the election while Gantz declared he would not support the unilateral evacuation of Jewish settlements (similar to the Gaza disengagement in 2005).

**Possible Post-Election Scenarios.** The specific results of Likud and Blue and White will be crucial for the post-election dynamics as to who, Netanyahu or Gantz, will have the better chance to form a government. President Reuven Rivlin will play an active role in the process, having announced that he would use all his constitutional remedies to avoid another repeat of the elections. Netanyahu remains the frontrunner, although he can no longer count on former coalition partner Lieberman, who announced that his party would only support a secular national unity government. According to polls, without Israel Our Home, the right-wing coalition of Likud and the nationalist-religious parties most likely will not have a parliamentary majority (just like after the April election, when it had 60 seats) or it will be minimal. Similarly, the perspective is slim for the creation of a centre-left coalition by the Blue and Whites, especially after rejecting the possibility of cooperation with "non-Zionist" (Arab) parties. Also, the construction of a centrist-religious coalition is unlikely due to the heavy dissent by orthodox parties to Yair Lapid's secular agenda.

A scenario in which none of the blocs gains a majority opens the way for a national unity government composed of the largest parties and Lieberman's. However, that scenario would be difficult to implement under the current political conditions. Blue and White supports a post-election coalition with Likud but without Netanyahu. Replacing a popular leader would be difficult for Likud given the potential for inter-factional struggles and resistance from the party's electorate. The post-election arithmetic and government formation process also could be influenced by splits in parties (especially in Blue and White, internally less coherent than Likud) or votes on current positions, for example, in the alliance of the Labour Party and Geshet or in Yamina.

**Perspectives.** Although Netanyahu still is in the best position to form a government, his space for political manoeuvre is diminishing, reflected in the inflation of election promises (e.g., regarding settlements) and harsh rhetoric such as the allegations about voting fraud, aimed to delegitimise the opposition. The PM, as after the April elections, will seek to pass legislation guaranteeing him immunity against corruption charges. The implementation of this plan would be possible if he maintains the current right-wing grouping. This increases the bargaining position of the religious-nationalist parties, which would make the approval of immunity legislation conditional on the implementation of their own demands.

If Netanyahu loses and there is a change of PM, that will result in the reconstruction of the Israeli political scene. However, a potential coalition of Likud and Blue and White (as well as a broad coalition of left and right) would be affected by high internal instability, which would hamper effective governance. At the same time, a national unity government might contribute to reducing political polarization in Israel. The political line of the new cabinet will be strictly dependent on the coalition composition, who is the next prime minister, and external conditions, above all, the attitude of the U.S.

A deterioration of Polish-Israeli relations cannot be ruled out, although this has not resonated strongly during the campaign, with the opposition having previously repeatedly criticized the Netanyahu government in this area.