

The Israeli Right and the 2019 Israel

by Michael Curtis



Elections in Israel often resemble performances of the theater of the absurd. This results from the parliamentary electoral system in which voters choose not individuals but vote for a party list. Political parties are allocated seats in the Knesset in proportion to the number of votes in the country as a whole. The threshold for gaining seats is 3.2% of total vote, increased from 2% in 2014, a device to prevent small parties from obtaining seats. Because of the candidacy of multiple parties, the result is that no one party has ever achieved a majority of the national vote since the first election in 1949, and therefore Israel has never had a one-party government but always coalitions.

The outcome of the election on April 9, 2019 reflected the issue. The election was hard fought, and was a tight race, and was an illustration that Israel is a vibrant pluralistic

democracy. Nevertheless, plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Forty parties competed, from serious ones to Zehut led by the colorful pro-marijuana libertarian and extreme nationalist Moshe Feiglin. The main contenders can best be considered in terms of right wing and left wing blocs.

The right included Likud (36), Kulena (5 seats), Union of Right Wing Parties (5), Shas (8), United Torah Judaism (7). Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Bibi) was regarded as the dominant personality of these right wing groups of free marketeers and strong nationalists. The left bloc was Blue and White (35), a new group that adopted the colors of the Israeli flag, Labor (6), Arab left wing Hadash Ta'al (6), Yisrael Beiteinu (5), Meretz (4) to which can be added the United Arab List-Balad (4).

The left bloc featured the 69 year-old General Benny Gantz, the same age as Netanyahu, a son of Holocaust survivors, a new comer to politics, Chief of Staff of Israeli army 2011-2015 when he retired, a life time soldier, who appealed to the political center, to those leaning left and those whose main objective was to defeat Bibi. Gantz , concentrating on the failures of Bibi, always spoke of a real government alternative that would replace Netanyahu. He established the Blue and White Alliance as a centrist, secular party. He also, at the start of his campaign, spoke somewhat imprudently of the number of terrorists he had killed when army commander in the 2014 war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. He was somewhat ambiguous about policy issues, but stressed the need for clean government and integrity, and contrasted his personality to that of Netanyahu, a man with expensive personal tastes in clothes and cigars, and one who had been indicted for accepting gifts from wealthy businessmen, and for giving favors to obtain positive media coverage.

Gantz stressed his military experience, and those of his main associates, Gabi Ashkenazi and Moshe Yaalon, who were former chiefs of staff. Gaining 35 seats was success for the new

party, the Blue and White party, only 7 weeks old, which combined Gantz's group, Israel Resilience party, with the centrist Yesh Atid, led by Yair Lapid, former finance minister and TV personality, and a small party led by Moshe "Bogie" Ya'alon, former chief of military staff, and defense minister under Netanyahu.

The 2019 election did not concentrate on discussion or debate of particular issues, but was really a referendum on Netanyahu, and his thirteen years as prime minister. If he remains in the post he will in July 2019 have surpassed David Ben-Gurion record as the longest serving prime minister. A towering figure in Israeli politics since he beat Shimon Peres in 1996 to become prime minister, his supporters proclaim him as a "magician," even as "king of Israel."

No one can deny the 69 year old Netanyahu's political skills, especially those of campaigning, even on the beaches. He overcame the challenge of Naftali Bennett, chief of staff under Netanyahu 2006-8, and Ayelet Shaked in 2012 for leadership of his party, and the party under these two former rising stars did not obtain 3.25% of the vote in 2019 and therefore has no parliamentary seats. Netanyahu successfully portrayed himself as the only person qualified to safeguard Israel against the threats to security from Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza. He also reminded voters, especially the 400,000 settlers in the West Bank, of his opposition in 2005 to withdrawing Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip.

Bibi in nationalist rhetoric to a degree used religious imagery; "I believe that the lord and history have given the people of Israel another opportunity, a golden opportunity, to turn our country into a strong nation among the strongest in the world." His verbiage might also have been subtle campaigning, probably an appeal to the Ultra-Orthodox, the haredim who are growing in proportion, now over 8% or 600,000-700,000, of the Israel Jewish population because of

their higher birthrate than that of secular citizens.

Bibi's victory confirmed that the left is not in power. Labor, once the dominant party of social democracy in Israel, and prominent in the Socialist International when Golda Meir was vice-president, is now in 2019 reduced to 6 seats. In the context of present-day modernity and globalization, and the increasing activity of Muslims from the Magreb, Israel has emphasized Zionism more than Socialism, and has moved to the political right. Bibi drifted to the right; the left has moved to the center.

Netanyahu has benefited from Israel's economic performance, low unemployment, high incomes, emphasis on technology, attraction of considerable foreign investment into the high wage sector, privatization, though his administration has also witnessed cuts in subsidies for unemployed and in child assistance payments.

Bibi, as a shrewd campaigner, has also benefited by his rapport and contacts with Sunni Arabs in the Gulf and Egypt and Muslim leaders in Africa, and with foreign leaders, the nationalist leaders in the world, such as Narendra Modi in Delhi, Budapest, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, and rather surprisingly China's vice president Wang Qishan and Viktor Orban, prime minister of Hungary.

Most of all, Netanyahu benefited from support by President Donald Trump and his declared policies: opposition of the nuclear deal with Iran; movement of U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; declaration that the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps is a terrorist organization; approval of Bibi's declaration of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights; and no opposition to suggestions for annexation of part of the West Bank. In Israel in 2019 there were some similarities with Trump in 2016. The left, often with a slogan "anyone but Bibi" imitates the campaign against Trump. Netanyahu had been

falsely accused of racism, and he faced a largely hostile press.

Bibi. in extraordinary fashion not only accepted Trump's invitation to the White House, but also, five days before the election, one to the Kremlin where he talked with President Vladimir Putin without any inkling of "collusion." As a result, the body of an Israeli soldier missing since the 1982 Lebanon War, found by the Russian army in Syria, was returned to Bibi.

Bibi also benefited from the low turnout, around 50%, among the 1.9 million Israeli-Arabs, who are politically split. In 2015, four Arab parties formed a joint list in the election, and won 13 seats. In 2019 the Arabs were divided between two parties, the secular Balad, and the Islamist Ra'am. Some Arabs called for a boycott of the 2019 election. Others argue that 1,200 cameras were hidden in Arab polling stations, and this caused fear of voting.

An Israeli government can only be formed if a party is able to control at least 61 of the 120 seats in the Knesset. Since no single party has achieved this, the President of Israel Reuven Rivlin, a largely non-political ceremonial figure, has to choose the person as prime minister, the party leader who has the best chance to form a coalition government. In 2019 this is almost certain to mean the reappointment of Netanyahu.

The election shows the rightward trend in Israel with 56% describing themselves as right wing. Polls suggest that Netanyahu was supported by two thirds of voters 18 to 24, and by more than half of those aged 25-34. Support for the Ultra-Orthodox has grown. This means, among other things, less support for a two-state solution. The country is liberal on social issues such as gay rights and universal health care and on economic issues, but it has become more rigid on security issues, largely because of Palestinian reluctance to negotiate. Bibi has shown that the country is not isolated

internationally in spite of no agreement with the Palestinians, but it is incumbent on him to continue the search for a negotiated settlement.