

The Israeli Government of Change under Naftali Bennett: Policy Substance, Political Fragility

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The March 2021 Israeli election produced a government that blocked an ongoing deterioration in governance, in the civility of political discourse and in the solidity of the democratic system, as well as in Israel's international standing, especially with regard to its relations with Europe and the democratic side of the American body politic. On 13 June 2022, this government celebrated a year in office. Given its fragility, its survival for even that long was a matter of some surprise. Headed by Naftali Bennett, whose own party commanded a mere six votes in the 120-member Knesset, it rested on a razor-thin majority and was beset by internal contradictions of such intensity that it was unable to address, much less effect, significant change in the two most momentous issues on the policy agenda: religion and the State and relations with the Palestinians. True, there were some rather impressive achievements in other, less contentious areas. Nevertheless, the heterogeneous character of the coalition and the defection or threatened defection of several disgruntled Knesset members undermined the government's longer-term prospects and the durability of the changes it did manage to bring about. The question about longer-term prospects was answered less than a week after the government's anniversary, when Bennett and his co-leader, Yair Lapid, fearing a loss of parliamentary confidence, announced their intention to dissolve parliament, necessitating yet another round of elections, probably in the autumn. The results of those elections will determine whether any of the government's accomplishments will outlast its incumbency.

Coalition Building and Domestic Affairs

From 2019 to 2021, Israel held four elections. The first three resulted in hung parliaments, so evenly divided that no one was able to muster the 61 votes needed to secure confirmation of a new government. Consequently, the incumbent government continued in office, on a temporary basis, unable even to pass a new budget. The fourth election produced a similar arithmetic outcome, but with two major differences. The first is that some of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's former right-wing and/or religious coalition partners had become so alienated from him that they broke away and joined with centrist, centre-left and left-wing parties to come close to the majority they needed. The second is that one of the two Arab parties, the Islamist-oriented United Arab List, agreed to join this coalition in order to promote civic matters of most immediate concern to its constituents (though without formal membership in the government), thereby putting the total number of members over the top.

The result was the most radically diverse coalition in Israeli history, one that spanned the entire spectrum of society (apart from the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties) and some of whose component parts held diametrically opposed views on the most salient issues on the public agenda. But precisely because the government's existence was so precarious and the shared antipathy of its constituent parts to Netanyahu – waiting in the wings in the event that it collapsed – was so strong, coalition leaders avoided addressing these issues head on. Instead, and with the same rationale, they strove to fudge, compromise and agree on other issues, on which differences were not so pronounced.

One consequence of this was a remarkable shift toward civility in the tenor of public discourse. In a

conscious effort to emphasize inclusiveness rather than divisiveness, government leaders adopted a more restrained tone. In particular, they avoided labelling political opponents as enemies or attributing hostility to the State and/or the Jewish people to all those who opposed their preferred course of action. Unlike the previous government, they also refrained from attacking the judiciary, the attorney general, the media, the police and any other elements of the “deep State” ostensibly involved in conspiracies against “the people,” including the prosecution of allegedly trumped-up criminal charges against the Prime Minister. As a result, the public sphere was marked by a less charged atmosphere, and threats against the institutions that provided essential checks and balances in a functioning democracy were alleviated, at least for the time being.

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Secondly, the government did manage to register some noteworthy policy gains, the most prominent of which was the passing of a budget (for the first time in two years), thus enabling the imposition of conscious prioritization in spending choices (rather than operating on the basis of continuing resolutions from previous years). One product of this was the allocation of more resources to underfunded Arab localities, part of a broader approach to the Arab population, which also included the connection of electricity to unauthorized buildings, a crackdown on crime in Arab towns and a campaign to collect illegal firearms. None of these measures, or any others, could reasonably be expected to bring about complete Jewish-Arab rapprochement, but they did help to reduce tensions and prevent another round of the widespread communal violence that afflicted the country, especially in mixed towns, in mid-2021. Also on the economic front, the government managed to shepherd the country through another round of the Covid-19 epidemic – the so-called Omicron variant – without resorting to a nationwide shutdown.

Regional Integration

Israel’s foreign relations also witnessed a considerable improvement, as the country intensified ties within the region and beyond, bilaterally and in multilateral settings. Within the region, the government built on the foundations of the 2020 Abraham Accords, laid during the term of the previous government, in order to broaden and deepen relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Developments included a variety of defence, economic, agricultural and technological cooperation agreements, including a free trade agreement, as well as exchanges of high-level visits. Similar advances characterized relations with Morocco, visited by the Defence Minister in order to pursue formal security and intelligence ties, and where an Israeli embassy was opened in August 2021; with Jordan, which hosted high-level visits and expanded trade links; and with Egypt, which concluded an agreement in mid-2022 to liquefy Israeli natural gas for re-export to Egypt (part of broader international efforts to reduce European dependence on Russian gas). Even contacts with Saudi Arabia, maintained *sub rosa* for many years, were officially acknowledged in the form of permission for Israeli aircraft to fly through Saudi airspace. There was also a noticeable détente in Turkish-Israeli relations, not because of any innovation in Israeli policy but rather due to a reorientation of Turkey’s regional posture, stemming largely from President Erdogan’s domestic/economic calculations. Accompanying these improvements in a series of bilateral relations was an expansion of multilateral arrangements. Israel participated in joint naval exercises in the Gulf along with the US, the UAE and Bahrain, and in late 2021, it initiated a quadrilateral economic cooperation agreement with the UAE, India and the United States. It also signed a tripartite arrangement involving the import from Jordan of electricity from UAE-financed solar-powered generators and the export to Jordan of water produced in desalination plants powered by natural gas.

Foreign Policy beyond the Region

Beyond the region, Israel strove to rehabilitate relations with the European Union, which had come under stress during the years of Netanyahu-led gov-

ernments. Particular attention was paid to intensified security, energy and economic ties with Greece and Cyprus. No less significant was Israel's ability to dispel some of the tensions in relations with the democratic side of the aisle in US politics, a matter of considerable urgency following the inauguration of Biden after years of unusually partisan intimacy in relations between the Republicans and the Prime Minister of Israel. This was manifested in Israel's determination to avoid stridency in the reservations it expressed about negotiations with Iran on a revived Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and in Biden's announcement of a planned visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia, just when Bennett was undergoing his greatest domestic political stress.

The Elephant in the Room: Iran

All in all, then, the foreign policy landscape looked fairly positive. Just as the government was able, at least partially and temporarily, to suppress the issue of religion and the State in domestic affairs, it was able, at least partially and temporarily, to lower the profile of the Palestinian issue. There was, however, one huge flaw in this otherwise encouraging picture – Iran. On the one hand, the existence of a common threat from Iran is the primary reason for the détente between Israel and many Arab states, especially in the Gulf. Indeed, one of the most dramatic manifestations of regional integration was the establishment of an air, missile, and drone-defence cooperation forum, convened by the US, with Egypt, Jordan, the UAE and Bahrain, but also Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, there was considerable speculation that Biden's visit might produce a more institutionalized regional security structure grounded in formal Israeli-Saudi ties.

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Israel was fairly successful in disrupting Iran's efforts to project its power by interfering with the con-

solidation of forward Iranian positions in Syria and the transfer via Syria of precision guidance systems to Hezbollah (which also avoided any escalatory activity on Israel's northern border).

On the other hand, Iran did continue support for its proxies in the Palestinian arena (Hamas and Islamic Jihad) and the Arabian Peninsula. Even more momentous was Israel's failure to either dissuade the US from categorically abandoning the quest to revive the JCPOA, from which America had withdrawn in 2018, or, alternatively, ensure that any new agreement that was crafted would correct the defects of the original version. Either of these outcomes was arguably beyond Israel's capacity to achieve, but the fact remains that Iran did persist in its effort to develop a military nuclear capability (while also advancing its missile and drone development programmes). Israel actively targeted facilities and individuals involved in the Iranian nuclear and missile programmes (as well as others active in exporting terrorism), thereby slowing the rate of progress and complicating Iranian efforts to accelerate the "breakout timeline." That is not insignificant, but the fact remains that during its time in office, the current Israeli government did not and could not eliminate the most serious threat to Israeli security: the prospect of a nuclear-armed Islamic Republic of Iran.

Future Prospects

Nor did it have the time to continue to address that or other problems. As noted, the coalition did not consist of natural partners, but was instead an unwieldy association whose major common denominators were antipathy to Netanyahu and apprehension about yet another election. But the inherent contradictions between left and right, religious and secular, and Jewish and Arab parties were contained only as long as their conflicting approaches to the most neuralgic issues could be suppressed. Despite periodic strains, that was achieved for almost a year, by practically treating the status quo on both matters as sacrosanct (apart from some minor changes in control over certification of Jewish dietary laws and improvements in the material quality of life for Palestinians), including the refusal to revive high-level Israeli-Palestinian political negotiations.

However, eventually (and inevitably) these issues reasserted themselves, usually for reasons like the religious or religious/national calendar, or the expiration of “temporary” legal arrangements governing the status of Israeli settlers in the West Bank, or outbursts of terrorist activity by Palestinians or Jewish settlers, all of which were beyond the control of party leaders. When that happened, the contradictions bubbling below the surface burst through – because party discipline was not strong enough to force individual Knesset members – who “owned” their seats and could not be ousted before the next election – to continue to vote contrary to their most deeply-held beliefs.

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By June 2022, several Knesset members had defected from the coalition, costing the government its

majority and its ability to govern. Facing a gloomy future, government leaders decided to preempt their ouster and acted to dissolve parliament, thereby taking the country to yet another round of elections. While prediction of election results is inherently uncertain, projection from previous experience suggests that the most likely outcome is yet another deadlock between the major blocs.

Because of the electoral system of proportional representation, this political morass, involving a polarized coalition in a polarized Knesset, is an accurate reflection of a polarized public. In many respects, this situation recalls the condition of the Fourth French Republic. That analogy suggests that only a sense of epic crisis, coupled with the appearance of a figure of indisputably heroic proportions, can bring about a fundamental transformation; the system cannot transform itself. Given what looks suspiciously like systemic paralysis, the achievements of Israeli civil society in many walks of life, including economics, technology, medicine, education and defence, are all the more noteworthy – under this government as under those that came before it. But these achievements cannot be directly attributed to the performance of the political system, and without some reformation of that system, continued successes cannot be projected. Neither can mitigation of the failures that also exist.