

# Israel's Straitjacket

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15 NOVEMBER 2022 — POLITICS

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First came the jokes. Black humour as a natural response to frustration and disappointment. 'How was it yesterday?' my Tel-Avivian neighbor, also a leftist, shouted from his balcony, wearing shorts and no shirt, sipping his morning coffee the day after the elections. 'Not great', I shouted back, continuing my brisk walk toward the kindergarten. 'You should have had great fun voting', he said, with a knowing emphasis on 'great fun'. 'Why is that?', I asked. 'Because', he replied, delighted to have reached his punchline, 'it was your last time!'

The Israeli elections of 1 November were indeed rather shocking. For the first time since its establishment in 1992, Meretz (the left-Zionist party) was ousted from parliament, as was Balad (an Arab-Palestinian party striving to make Israel 'a state for all its citizens'). Simultaneously, we witnessed the spectacular rise of the national-religious list, composed of the Religious Zionism party led by Bezael Smotrich (arrested in 2005 along with five other right-wing activists for plotting to 'blow up cars on the Ayalon highway', according to the Shin-Bet deputy chief) and the neo-fascist party Otzma Yehudit ('Jewish Strength') led by Itamar Ben-Gvir (convicted in 2007 of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organization). Their joint platform was backed by almost 11% of Israeli voters and received 14 seats. Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likkud party won 32 seats, while current PM Yair Lapid's supposedly centrist outfit Yesh Atid picked up 24. The Labor Party – the leading political force during Israel's first three decades, and a major player thereafter – came away with only 4.

Of course, Israeli democracy was nothing to brag about before the latest elections. The country's so-called 'change government', which lasted from June 2021 to November 2022, was largely comprised of parties from the centre and centre right, who united in opposition to Netanyahu and viewed his ongoing corruption trial as a national disgrace. Their coalition also included the last remnants of the Israeli left and, controversially, the United Arab List. Its domestic agenda revolved around good governance, stabilization of the political system and passing a state budget for the first time in three years. But when it came to the occupation, the siege of Gaza and the refusal to negotiate with the Palestinian Authority, it was not much different to the previous Netanyahu administration. Israel's Zionist straitjacket may allow some room for debate on internal issues, but its confines are clear.

The most reactionary Knesset in history will now be sworn in on November 15. Yet this should not be read as a fundamental shift to the right. It is rather the outcome of various strategic manoeuvres on Netanyahu's part as well as long-term processes within Israeli society. Such factors can be elaborated by analyzing the recent history of two political groupings: the Jewish religious parties on the one hand, and the Arab-Palestinian parties on the other.

Starting with the former: Netanyahu will most likely form his government out of the following components: Likkud (32 seats), Religious Zionism (14 seats), Shas (the Sephardic orthodox party, 11 seats) and Yahadut Hatorah (the Ashkenazi ultraorthodox party, 7 seats). The incoming PM can easily assemble this 64-seat bloc, in a parliament of 120 members, with the automatic support of all three Jewish religious parties (representing Mizrahi and Ashkenazi alike), which are now considered 'natural allies' of the Zionist right. Yet this is by no means a natural situation. It is the result of Netanyahu's long-term plan to bring religious, orthodox and even ultraorthodox parties – which are in large part non-Zionist – into his political project, by framing it as quintessentially 'Jewish'. The old saying goes that 'the Torah has seventy faces', but Netanyahu and the hard-right have given it only one. For religious parties, the latter is now a close collaborator while centrists and leftists have become the ultimate anti-Jewish Other – which, in the long run, leaves little hope for another changing of the guard.

Secondly, and no less cannily, was Netanyahu's strategy vis-à-vis the Arab parties and Palestinian citizens of Israel. During his previous time in office, he both deepened Israel's divide-and-rule approach to the Palestinians – precipitating the total disintegration of the Arab Joint List – and succeeded in cementing a fanciful association between the Arab parties and terrorism, thereby discrediting their criticism of the occupation. After United Arab List joined Lapid's fragile coalition, Netanyahu (and the right in general) endlessly reiterated the claim that the new government was 'reliant on supporters of terror'. The effectiveness of this smear showed how entrenched the discourse of 'terrorization' had become, thanks in part to other Zionist political actors from the putative centre and left (Lapid, for example, is currently refusing to meet with the leaders of the Arab parties Hadash and Ta'al). Through such rhetoric, Netanyahu established a comprehensive formula which meant that every Arab-Palestinian would be required to prove that he or she is not a terrorist. Such delegitimization had a clear strategic aim, making it almost impossible for Arab-Palestinians to voice their opinions, and destroying the conditions for a stable centrist or centre-left coalition.

In other words, by coding the religious parties as right wing, and the Arab parties as terrorists, Netanyahu has rendered any joint coalition of Jews and Arabs unthinkable. What makes this strategy so successful, and so dangerous, is its apparent irreversibility. Over the next four years, the government will take extraordinary steps to lock in its hegemony. It plans to introduce an 'overriding clause' that will enable the parliament to overturn Supreme Court rulings, effectively abolishing the separation of powers and ensuring that Netanyahu's trial will end without conviction. Netanyahu will also exploit the impotence of international law, along with Israel's warm relations with the new authoritarian right in Europe, Asia and the Middle East, to realize the dream of a de facto annexation of Area C in the West Bank.

Despite what my neighbour said, it is most likely that we will meet again at the ballot box once the new government has completed its term. But the question is what options we – let alone the Palestinians – will have, after four more years of Netanyahu and Religious Zionism.

*Read on: Perry Anderson, 'The House of Zion', NLR 96.*

