

Seeking a Kingmaker in Israeli Politics

by Michael Curtis



Change partners and dance with me. Speaking on Tuesday September 10, 2019, Leslie H. Wexner, founder and owner of Victoria's Secret, and Bath and Body works, commenting on his long-time friendship and relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, said "At some point in your life, we are all betrayed by friends, and if we haven't, we're really fortunate to have lived a perfectly sheltered life. Inconsistency is a natural human condition, as Alice in Wonderland understood: "I could tell you my adventures, but it's no use going back to yesterday because I was a different person then." Politics in Israel illustrates the changing nature of relationships, as 80 year-old President Reuven Rivlin, long time figure in the Likud party, announced he was no longer friendly with Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of Likud and prime minister of Israel. Political deadlock of major parties in Israel does not lead to wedlock between them.

That deadlock has appeared again with the Knesset parliamentary election of September 17, 2019 when no party achieved a majority, and the provisional results of the number of seats obtained by the more prominent parties are as follows without grouping them as left or right: Likud 31, Shas 9, United Torah Judaism 8, Yisrael Beiteinu 8, Yamini 6, Blue and White 33, Labor 6, Democratic Union 6, Arab Joint List 13.

In view of the results of the Knesset election, President Rivlin has a choice since there is no outright victor, who to call to try to form a government, either the incumbent prime minister, 69 year-old Netanyahu who had been PM for 13 years, the longest serving PM, or his political rival 60 year-old Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White party, or even another Likud personality such as Gideon Sa'ar, former cabinet secretary or Yudi Edelstein, *refusnikin* the Soviet Union and Speaker of the Knesset, or Avigdor Lieberman. Israel faced a similar problem in 1984 when a choice had to be made between Shimon Peres, Labor, or Yitzhak Shamir, Likud. At that time a compromise, a government of national unity was formed, with Peres being PM for the first 25 months and Shamir as foreign minister, then reversal of the roles.

The magic number is 61, control of a majority of seats in the 120 member Knesset allowing government to be formed and stay in existence. No single party has ever achieved that number, and therefore all governments have been coalitions able to control a majority in the Knesset.

The reasons are complex and vies are variable, a mixture of ideological views and personal ambitions and rivalries. The remarkable iron lady of Israeli politics, the strong willed and straight-talking Golda Meier, explained to Richard Nixon, "You are the President of 150 million Americans. I'm the prime minister of six million prime ministers." Everyone wants to wear the crown.

At the Knesset election of April 2019, 47 parties competed,

but most failed to cross the electoral threshold, 3.2% of the total national vote, in order to gain a seat.

In September, the number of parties dropped to 32, many running on merged lists. In spite of the large number of parties and the overlapping of their political appeals, the election was essentially between right and left groups, though left and right are difficult to define with any precision, and an attempt of Israeli Arabs to be more prominent.

Electioneering in Israel as in other countries, may suffer from deception, evasions, equivocation, and false or inaccurate conclusions drawn from objective true information. The communications of the leader of the right, Bibi Netanyahu whose party Likud has been the leading force, may not have fully accurate or true, but there was no deception about his objectives. His main campaign was on national security issues. He announced on September 9, 2019 that Israel had discovered a new Iranian nuclear weapons site at Abadeh, south of Isfahan. The next day, on September 10 he announced that if remains prime minister he will extend Israeli sovereignty to the 31 Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, including 22 in the Jordan Valley, and some in the northern Dead Sea region. The day before the election, September 16, Bibi announced again he would annex Kiryat Arba and the Jewish areas of Hebron, probably the 4% of the city that includes the Tomb of the Patriarchs, though he would need a mandate to do this.

Netanyahu is clear on two issues: opposition to the Palestinian right of return; and conviction that Jerusalem will remain united. To strengthen his position, Bibi also went to Sochi to see Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian defense chief Sergi Shoigu for at least three reasons: to strengthen security ties and military cooperation between the two countries; to talk about getting Iran out of Syria; but also to woo Russian speaking immigrants in Israel from support of Avigdor Lieberman and his party. It was 61 year-old

Lieberman, born in Moldova and once a night club bouncer, Defense and Foreign minister, secular and hawkish nationalist, whose party Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) got 17 % of popular vote by drawing on the 1.5 million Russian speakers in Israel, and refused to join Netanyahu's coalition with religious parties in May 2019. Lieberman and his party want to eliminate the exemption of the Ultra-Orthodox, Haredi, from serving in the military, and are concerned about the large number of unemployed religious students. But the Ultras are Zionists. Will Lieberman, merging security and secularism, be the kingmaker of Israeli politics? For Netanyahu there is a dilemma, the problem of the Ultra-Orthodox population with its monopoly on marriage, divorce, and religious conversions, has gained power in the system and which may be an obstacle to any link between him and Lieberman.

Opposition leader Benny Gantz, former military leader, is notable for a low key style of campaigning, balanced, seen as moderate, who focused on allegations of bribery, fraud, breach of trust against Netanyahu as well as on national security. He is personally well liked, yet he is regarded by only 31% of the population as the best candidate to become prime minister, compared with 46% favoring Bibi. Gantz is liberal on social issues, but to get votes from the right wing he expressed nationalist policies, and took two former Israeli army chiefs as running mates. He and his party, the Blue and White party, also believes in strengthening the settlements in the West Bank and view the Jordan Valley as Israel's eastern security border, but do not call for annexation of the territories. This point had been made by the former left wing Labor leader Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin who in October 1995, a month before his assassination, declared in the Knesset, "The security border of the State of Israel will be located in the Jordan Valley in the broadest meaning of that term."

The main Arab parties again formed an alliance, the Arab Joint List, led by Ayman Odeh, head of Hadash and self-defined

socialist. It merged individuals from different ideological positions, nationalists, Islamists, Communists. In 2015 they had been the third largest force in the Knesset but did less well on April 9, 2019 when they won only 10 seats. Turnout of Arabs who constitute a sixth of the electorate is low, only 49.2%, compared with the national 68% turnout. The Arab Joint List in 2019 was more assertive, gaining 13 seats, even suggesting as Odeh did the Arabs might join a center-left coalition government.

The die is cast. Netanyahu, in what some suggested was an electoral stunt, stole the thunder of the extreme right, the Yamina, religious Zionists, party, and Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), presenting himself as the guardian of Israel against its enemies, including Iran. Bibi's proposals mean carving out almost a third of the occupied West Bank, home to 2.7 million Palestinians, and cuts off Jericho from rest of the West Bank. These areas are for Bibi the eastern border of the state of Israel. The Jordan River is a natural barrier and an essential strategic asset, to prevent weapons smuggling into the West Bank. Most of the Jordan valley and northern Dead Sea are part of Area C, already under Israeli security and civil control. This annexation would give secure, permanent borders in the east to Israel for the first time.

The crucial question is whether the Netanyahu proposals bury any chance of peace between Palestinians and Israelis. Unilateral annexation of occupied territory is highly controversial, yet there is general agreement that Israel should control the Jordan Valley for a time after a peace treaty, though not annex it. The Jordan Valley of 2,400 square miles, is home to 11,000 Israelis in settlements and 80,000 Palestinians, mostly in Jericho. Nearly 90% is already under Israeli administrative and military control.

Whether to help the Netanyahu campaign or not, the Trump administration has been friendly to Israel on a number of issues, the move of the U.S. Embassy, recognition of Jerusalem

as Israel's capital, Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, agreement on preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Trump now proposes a Mutual Defense Treaty with Israel after the election.

Again, in the existing turmoil in Israel politics, Golda Meier is pertinent, "Don't be cynical. Don't believe that everything is judged only by expediency. There is idealism in the world."