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## ***A Country in Turmoil: Why Netanyahu is a Symptom, Not Cause of Israel's Political Crisis***

It is convenient to surmise that Israel's current political crisis is consistent with the country's unflinching trajectory of short-lived governments and fractious ruling coalitions. While this view is somewhat defensible, it is also hasty.

Israel is currently at the cusp of a fourth general election in less than two years. Even by Israel's political standards, this phenomenon is unprecedented, not only in terms of the frequency of how often Israelis vote, but also of the constant shifting in possible coalitions and seemingly strange alliances.

It seems that the only constant in the process of forming coalitions following each election is that Arab parties must not, under any circumstances, be allowed into a future government. Decision-making in Israel has historically been reserved for the country's Jewish elites. This is unlikely to change anytime soon.

Even when the Arab parties' coalition, the Joint List, imposed itself as a possible kingmaker following the September 2019 elections, the centrist Kahol Lavan (Blue and White) list refused to join forces with Arab politicians to oust Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Kahol Lavan's leader, Benny Gantz, preferred to go back to the polls on March 2 and eventually join forces with his arch-enemy, Netanyahu, than make a single concession to the Joint List.

Gantz's decision did not only expose how racism occupies a central role in Israeli politics, but also illustrated Gantz's own foolishness. In rejecting the Joint List, he committed an act akin to political suicide. On the very day, March 26, that he joined a Netanyahu-led coalition, his own Blue and White alliance collapsed, with Yair Lapid of Yesh Atid and Moshe Ya'alon of Telem breaking away immediately from the once-dominant coalition.

Worse, Gantz lost not just the respect of his own political constituency, but of the Israeli public as well. According to an opinion poll released by Israel's Channel 12 News on

December 15, if elections were to be held on that day, Gantz's Blue and White would receive only 6 seats out of 120 seats available in the Israeli Knesset. Gantz's former coalition partner, Yesh Atid, according to the same poll, would obtain an impressive 14 seats.

While Netanyahu's Likud Party will remain on top with 27 seats, Gideon Sa'ar's "New Hope – Unity for Israel," would come a close second with 21 seats. Sa'ar's is a brand new party, which represents the first major split from the Likud since the late Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, formed the offshoot Kadima party in 2005.

Netanyahu and Sa'ar have a long history of bad blood between them, and although anything is possible in the formation of Israel's political alliances, a future right-wing coalition that brings them both together is a dim possibility. If Sa'ar has learned anything from Gantz's act of political self-mutilation, it is that any coalition with Netanyahu is a grave and costly mistake.

Ideological differences between Netanyahu and Sa'ar are quite minimal. In fact, both are fighting to obtain the vote of essentially the same constituency – although Sa'ar is hoping to extend his appeal to the disgruntled and betrayed Blue and White voters, who are eager to see someone – anyone – oust Netanyahu.

Never in the history of Israel, spanning seven decades, had a single individual served as the focal point of the country's many political currents. While beloved by some, Netanyahu is much loathed by many, to the extent that entire parties or whole coalitions are formed simply to remove him from politics. That in mind, the majority of Israelis agree that the man is corrupt, as he has been indicted in three separate criminal cases.

However, if this is the case, how is a politically controversial and corrupt leader able to remain at the helm of Israeli politics for over 14 years? The typical answer often alludes to the man's unmatched skills of manipulation and backdoor shady dealings. In the words of Yossi Verter, writing in the daily Haaretz, Netanyahu is "a first-class master swindler".

This analysis alone, however, is not enough to explain Netanyahu's durability as the longest-serving Israeli Prime Minister. There is an alternative reading, however, one that is predicated on the fact that Israel has been, for quite some time, navigating uncharted political territories without a specific destination in mind.

Prior to the inception of Israel on the ruins of historic Palestine in 1948, Israel's Jewish political elites clashed quite often over the best way to colonize Palestine, how to deal with the British Mandate over the country, among other weighty subjects. These differences, however, largely faded away in 1948, when the newly-founded country unified under the banner of Mapai – the predecessor to Israel's current Labor party – which dominated Israeli politics for decades.

Mapai's dominance received a major boost after the Israeli occupation of the remainder of Palestine in 1967. The building and expansion of more Jewish colonies in the newly-acquired

territories breathed life into the mission of Israel's founding fathers. It was as if Zionism, the founding ideology of Israel, was rediscovered once more.

It was not until 1977 that the erstwhile negligible Israeli right formed a government for the first time in the country's history. That date also ushered in a new age of political instability, which worsened with time. Still, Israeli politicians remained largely committed to three main causes in this specific order: the Zionist ideology, the party and the politicians' own interests. The assassination of the Labor Party leader, Yitzhak Rabin, at the hands of a right-wing Israeli zealot in 1995, was a bloody manifestation of the new era of unprecedented fragmentation that followed. A decade later, when Sharon declared the 'Disengagement from Gaza' plan of 2005, he further upset a barely functioning political balance, leading to the formation of Kadima, which threatened to erase the Likud from the political map.

Throughout these turbulent times, Netanyahu was always present, playing the same divisive role, as usual. He led the incitement against Rabin and, later, challenged Sharon over the leadership of the Likud. On the other hand, he was also responsible for resurrecting the Likud and he kept it alive notwithstanding its many ideological, political and leadership crises. The latter fact explains Likud's loyalty to Netanyahu, despite his corruption, nepotism and dirty politics. They feel that, without Netanyahu's leadership, the Likud could easily follow the same path of irrelevance or total demise as was the case with the Labor and Kadima parties, respectively.

With none of Israel's founding fathers alive or relevant in the political arena, it is hard to imagine what course Israel's future politics will follow. Certainly, the love affair with the settlement enterprise, 'security' and war is likely to carry on unhindered, as they are the bread and butter of Israeli politics. Yet, without a clear ideology, especially when combined with the lack of a written Constitution, Israeli politics will remain hostage to the whims of politicians and their personal interests, if not that of Netanyahu, then of someone else.

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