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Tyranny of the Majority: Why It's OK Not to Be OK With Israel's New Government

Jason Ditz

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Israel's March 17 election has swept in a new coalition government dominated by the far-right of its already rightward-leaning political spectrum. The vote, and also the unseemly campaigning of the final few days, has stirred no small measure of grumbling within Israel, as all pretense of moderation flew out the window in favor of jingoism and old-fashioned race baiting.

A peculiar side-effect of this disquiet is a backlash on the right, chiding both the international community and domestic dissidents, and exhorting everyone to respect the voters' choice. Democracy is sacrosanct, they insist, and we must support with the results.

This is, of course, total nonsense.

Democracy is at the best of times the tyranny of the majority, and to the extent most liberal democracies in the world work, it is because most voters are decent enough not to over-abuse their power. This is not always the case.

In recent years, we've seen several examples in Europe of far-right parties scoring significant results in systems of proportional representation. The nationalist far-right, with its familiar trappings of brutishness and xenophobia, is regularly the subject of both domestic and

international critique, even when it represents only a powerful opposition force or a minority member of a coalition government.

In the past several years we've seen almost non-stop criticism of Hungary for the rise of the Jobbik Party, and around the turn of the century, the rise of Jorg Haider to a position of even minor influence in a coalition government led several nations to impose sanctions on Austria.

We should expect no less from Israel, the self-declared representative of Western democracy in the Middle East, and they should expect treatment no less than Central European powers when their electorate is drawn heavily off the reservation. Unwholesome nationalism begets scorn, anywhere and everywhere.

In Israel, the far-right is not just a vocal minority party or even a coalition partner. As of this month, it has won a strong plurality, and teeters on the cusp of outright majority. How it happened is perhaps the real scandal.

Israel's ruling Likud Party has always struggled with the line between ordinary conservatism and nationalist bellicosity. It is inevitable this should be the case in Israel, where the siege mentality so dominates political discourse, that the vague fear of the other should be early and often utilized in gaining votes.

Yet the days before the March 17 election were different, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu abandoning Likud's traditional mask of the aggrieved would-be peacemaker. In the final days of the campaign he made clear that peace with the Palestinians would never be reached so long as he was in power, and he pledged openly to radically expand settlements in the occupied territories to ensure that in future generations there would be too many settlers spread out too much to ever cobble together a contiguous Palestine out of the remainder.

With the campaign over, and the voting beginning, things only got uglier. On election day, Netanyahu took to Facebook to publicly lament high voter turnout among Israel's Arab minority, strongly suggesting that this turnout was an international plot against his continued rule.

It's the sort of election day race baiting worthy of the ugliest political periods in America's own history, and more disconcertingly, it worked. Exit polls from the day show that voters in favor of Netanyahu came out in droves, and began doing so almost immediately after the Facebook post was made.

That this was a democratic result does nothing to hide the shame of it. That Israel's electorate was cowed, after decades of fear-mongering by political opportunists, to bet on nationalism is a disgrace both to that nation and to the principles that underpin reasonable peoples' support for liberal democracy.

We must as rational human beings recognize what has happened, but no misguided loyalty to democracy as process should make us feel compelled to accept, let alone support, the nightmarish policies that the results of this election portend.

A decent person's first loyalty must ever be to decency, and to end results. A government dedicated to sabotaging regional peace deals and to persecuting a 20 percent ethno-religious minority within its own borders is no less deserving of our scorn when it comes about as the result of democratic sleight of hand than if these were the policies of a military junta or a hereditary monarch.

If anything we can feel somewhat more annoyed, as the voters in Israel had ample opportunity to choose civility, and have instead chosen the path of the sociopathic right, giving them a mandate to rule, and wage war, in the name of democracy.