

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE CURRENT: Is Netanyahu out as Israel's prime minister?

September 18, 2019

PARTICIPANTS:

Host: Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications, Brookings

Guest: Natan Sachs, Fellow and Director, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings

---

[MUSIC]

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the BPN.

Israelis have voted in national elections for the second time this year, and as of Wednesday, no clear winner has emerged, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party neck-and-neck with the centrist Blue and White party.

With us today to discuss this is Natan Sachs, fellow and director of our Center on Middle East Policy. Natan, can you tell us about how this election has shaken out, and why have we had two elections in the last five months?

SACHS: Thanks, Adrianna, it's great to be here.

This is a very strange election, two within six months. They were about, in April, and are still about, in Sept, three topics: Benjamin, Bibi, and Netanyahu, meaning it's all a referendum on one man. And it's not surprising – he's been prime minister for over 10 years consecutively now, and cumulatively he's the longest-serving prime minister in Israel's history. So, naturally it's all about him.

It's all about him even more so because he's in legal trouble. He may be facing indictment on very serious crimes. So for him the clock is ticking not just on the political scene, but even more so on the legal scene.

So all the parties and all the players on this game have been trying to calibrate their actions around that. Around Netanyahu: yes or no? And around his timeline. There's actually another man we need to talk about besides Netanyahu and besides the leader of the opposition, Benny Gantz. We have Avigdor Lieberman – he's the leader of a smaller, right-wing party – and we expected him to be simply part of Netanyahu's camp. That's why on April 9, the previous elections, we all thought Netanyahu had simply won. Then it turned out that Lieberman was not willing to join Netanyahu's coalition on the terms everyone had expected, and he basically forced Israel to another election with the only other option being Netanyahu giving up and letting someone else rule – something that Netanyahu is not wont to do.

So now we have a game mostly between these three gentlemen: Netanyahu on the right, Avigdor Lieberman in the center, perhaps now leaning center-left, which is odd, and Benny Gantz from

the center-left. And the game of how to form a coalition in the Knesset is what we're going to see probably in the next few weeks play out.

PITA: That was going to be my next question: What happens now with no clear winner? What kinds of coalitions might wind up forming?

SACHS: Once the final election results are certified – and I should say, we don't have final results yet – they'll be presented to the president of the country, and then he will summon to his mansion the representatives of all the factions that got into the Knesset, the parliament. They will recommend someone to become prime minister, one of the members of Knesset, and then the president will task one of these members of Knesset with forming a coalition. Usually that's easy – someone gets more than half the recommendations, or recommendations of more than half the members, which is 61 in this case, and then we pretty much know who's going to be prime minister and then they have to figure out how to divide up the portfolios and divide up policy.

Now it's almost certain that no one will have 61 recommendations. So now it comes back to the president. He has a v difficult task. There's one precedent for this: In 1984, neither the right wing Likud nor Labor, which was then the leader of the left, had a majority, and the president almost forced the two leaders to sit down together and form a national unity government that included both parties. They had an odd arrangement of rotation as prime minister. For two years, Shimon Peres, who was then leader of the Labor party, was prime minister, from 84-86, then from 86-88, Yitzhak Shamir from Likud. It was a very odd government, but at least in domestic policy, it was also a very successful one.

A national unity government now would be the obvious answer to this problem, because neither seem to have a majority. The problem is that Blue & White, Benny Gantz's party, has vowed not to join Netanyahu if he's indicted with criminal charges, which he might be very soon. The result is that it will be very hard to have a rotation government. There are ways out of this mess, but they're not simple. Maybe Likud gets rid of Netanyahu and another Likud leader emerges. Maybe Benny Gantz just walks back on his word and does sit with Netanyahu. Either way, we're in for a very rocky few weeks in Israeli politics and no one knows exactly what the result will be.

PITA: So this is somewhat existential for Netanyahu, depending how this shakes out. What will this mean for him, and what will it mean for him if he does stay in power but he's not incomplete control as he has been?

SACHS: So when Netanyahu entered these elections and the one prior, with the hope of gaining immunity from prosecution – that's what he really needs. If he's indicted on these criminal charges, he may face prison time. Now as a member of Knesset he can ask the Knesset for immunity, but the Supreme Court would likely overrule that, saying that the immunity isn't on substance, but rather on politics.

So his plan probably was to cripple the Supreme Court's ability to oversee the decisions of the Knesset – that would have long-term ramifications for Israel. For him personally, this was almost existential – if he could win big, he could do that and stay out of prison in the long term. Now, even if he manages to become prime minister of a unity government, the chances are very low that he could pass such a thing because Blue and White would not go along with it. So in that sense, Benjamin Netanyahu is

facing a major legal problem, almost irrespective of how the coalition negotiations go in the next few weeks.

PITA: Can you tell us a little more about the Blue and White party, their policies? Americans are really familiar with Netanyahu at this point, but less so with any of the other major players.

SACHS: That's a great question, and I'll tell you a secret: Israelis are also not sure what Blue and White stands for, because Blue and White is an amalgam of three, maybe four parties, depending how you count them. But it's three very different figures and then a fourth added to them: These are three generals who were each of them commanders of the Israeli Defense Forces at different times. Benny Gantz, the leader, is actually the youngest among them, but he was also commander of the IDF. And another party, Yesh Atid, led by Yair Lapid, who's made some trips to the United States, but is also less well-known. They by and large are center-left, but there's an exception to that. Bogie Ya'alon, one of the four gentlemen, is very much from the right wing. He was minister of defense under Netanyahu very recently. He and his party members, his small party members who are part of Blue and White, they are firmly on the right wing of Israeli politics on all issues and especially the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

So Blue and White is really united around one thing: opposition to Netanyahu, and promotion of the rule of law and anti-corruption. So their ticket is to bring down Netanyahu. What they do then with the power is more in question. Clearly Benny Gantz, if he became prime minister or joint prime minister in some rotation, is much more centrist than Netanyahu, so to the left of Netanyahu. He is broadly less inclined toward hawkish views on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but this is not a dramatic change of policy in Israel's scene, whether on the Palestinian issue and certainly not on other issues.

PITA: What could this potentially mean for the Palestinian issues? Netanyahu campaigned on annexing large swathes of territory within the West Bank – what does this mean for them?

SACHS: That's a great question. As I said, there's not huge differences in philosophy on most issues. On the Palestinian issue, there are two important differences. One the end game they have in mind, where Israel and the Palestinians might want to be down the road, is probably very different. And secondly, what steps Israel might take right now, most importantly on annexation, that's a big difference between the two. The notion of annexing, in this case, the Jordan Valley, about 20% of the West Bank, that's probably off the table, and it certainly would be off the table if Benny Gantz is prime minister. That's not to say he doesn't want the Jordan Valley as part of Israel, that's not to say some of his party don't, certainly some of Blue and White would like to annex it, they've said so publically, but as a party platform it's very unlikely to move forward.

And there is a very big difference between a Netanyahu leadership and a Benny Gantz leadership, and in particular because it's not just Netanyahu alone. Because of his legal trouble, because of the political weakness, if Netanyahu were in power in a small government now, he'd be beholden to the extreme right, the ones who really want to push this annexation. We've seen a Netanyahu who's much less cautious than in the past, both in talking about annexation and even possibly on going into an operation in Gaza on the eve of the elections, something which the Netanyahu of old would never have done. He's very hawkish, but very cautious, generally. Now he seems to have thrown caution to the wind in something of a bit of desperation because of the legal and political circumstance he's in.

PITA: Netanyahu has also had support in this area from the Trump administration of course which has been much more aggressive on this issue than in past administrations. What will a potential change in Israeli leadership mean for U.S.-Israeli relations?

SACHS: The U.S. has really in the past been a brake on a lot of Israeli plans that seemed to go too far, and that's been useful, even for Netanyahu himself. His right flank would say, "We need to build more settlements" or "annex something" and he'd say, "You don't understand, I have to talk to Obama, there's complications you don't know." Then came Trump, and not only was the United States not the brake on these plans, but through the Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, they seemed to be egging Israel along on many of these issues. So Friedman himself spoke about annexation, and it seemed perhaps to be either part of the Trump plan for peace, which is a bit ironic, or at least acceptable within the aftermath of that. So it's a very different Washington and that really does change the potential policy in Israel.

In the United States domestically, Israel, but especially Netanyahu, have become very closely associated with Trump because of the very close relationship between Netanyahu and Trump. In that regard, a change of leadership in Israel, even if it's another leader from the right, that would be very important for U.S.-Israeli relations. Israel used to be a bipartisan issue and if anything, had more support among Democrats than among Republicans. Today that's trending strongly the other way, where Republicans are very pro-Israeli and Democrats see Israel as aligned with Trump. If Netanyahu was not on the scene, I don't think that would be reversed, but I think that might be lessened to a certain degree. Part of the onus would be on a new Israeli leadership. How would they deal with the relationship with the United States? They will have no choice of course but to deal with the president of the United States. They didn't elect him, Americans did. They will have to curry favor with Trump. But the question is do they do so in a manner that alienates the Democratic Party, which, after all, at some point in time, will be back in power.

PITA: Natan, thank you so much for being here and explaining this today.

Thanks so much, Adrianna.