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THE CURRENT: What does another election deadlock mean for Israel?

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Host: Adrianna Pita, Office of Communications, Brookings

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

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Tuesday, Israel held its fourth round of national elections in the past two years, in what's largely seen in a referendum on the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the country's longest-serving prime minister, and currently under indictment and awaiting trial on a series of corruption charges.

Here to tell us what's been happening in this election and more broadly in Israel's politics is Natan Sachs, senior fellow and director of the Center for Middle East Policy here at Brookings. Natan, thanks for talking to us again.

SACHS: Thanks, Adrianna. It's my pleasure.

PITA: So, we're recording this as of Wednesday afternoon, where nearly 90% of votes have been counted. What can you tell us about where things stand right now?

SACHS: The one thing that is clear is that we do not have any clarity. There is no clear winner. Again, for the fourth time, it's very close to a draw. It's possible that Netanyahu could have a slight majority along with all potential partners in his pro-Netanyahu camp, but it looks likely that at the end of the counting it'll be a draw with one party, actually an Arab-based party, as kingmaker between the two camps. So, the stalemate we've seen that has led to four elections has more or less been revisited again this week.

PITA: And so, they'll be attempting to form a coalition, which as I understand, they need 61 members of the Knesset to agree to form, and if that doesn't happen, then we'll go to a fifth round of elections in August. Maybe you can tell us a little about how voters have been reacting to this level of uncertainty. Have we seen participation by voters change over these last four elections? Fatigue on their side? Or conversely, are more people coming out because they're just desperate to have some certainty.

SACHS: Both things have happened. So, the Israeli system is a complicated one. Obviously, you can have frequent elections; that's quite clear. It's a parliamentary system, meaning that if the Cabinet or the government as it's called in Israel loses support of the Knesset, it can often go to elections; and that's what we've seen happen. But it's also a system that has proportional representation voting, which we won't get into in depth, but what it often results in is a very large number of parties, such that in all of Israel's history, there's never been a party above 50 percent or 60 seats in the Knesset. And as a result, you always have to have a coalition.

So really, the game begins now. After an election, after all the votes are counted and the seats are allocated, that's when the game really starts. Netanyahu will try to cobble together more than 60 seats in the Knesset to gain a majority, and the opposition will try to do the same, although it's much harder for the opposition, because it's comprised of very disparate parties with very different views, from right wing and even very right-wing parties, all the way to the Arab-based joint list that represents in part the 20% of Israelis who are Arab citizens of Israel.

Israelis, the voters, have shown a combination of things. On the one hand, the fatigue is palpable. Everyone is just sick and tired of this nonsense. And it's not just a hassle. It's not just that people have to vote all the time. It's that the country is stuck. Israel is operating at the moment with no state budget. In fact, it's operating each month off 1/12 of the budget of 2019, because there was no budget in 2020, during this crisis, and now in 2021, we're of course already at the end of March. So, on the one hand, yes, fatigue. They're very tired of all this going on. We saw a dip in voting patterns – it's in the very low 60s now. So we do see a dip, but on the other hand, it's not a huge dip. It's a clear majority of the public voting and not very far from the highs. If that could continue to a fifth election sometime in the summer or more likely the fall, I don't know, but there is this contradictory feeling among Israelis: sick and tired of this and need to move on, a sense that everything is stuck, but also an unwillingness to yield on some very fundamental questions, mostly on the fate of one individual, Benjamin Netanyahu.

PITA: I want to ask you to talk a little bit more about that, about this being stuck. What has it meant for Israel having this many elections? With Netanyahu, he keeps coming out on top, so there's been some continuity of leadership, so not major shifts in policies, but in terms of either public confidence or in governance, what has this meant for the country?

SACHS: Israel operates with an interim government, an interim Cabinet, so long as there's no new government. So, Netanyahu will continue to be prime minister until a new prime minister is sworn in. So in that sense, there is continuity. He's clearly the legitimate prime minister of Israel at the moment, he represents the state abroad and makes all the major decisions. The government itself at the moment, the interim government, is a grand coalition between Netanyahu and his old main rival, Benny Gantz, who led the opposition in previous rounds. They are still together in this interim government. Benny Gantz is the defense minister. However, on many things, the country is genuinely stuck.

I mentioned the lack of budget. This means that thinking of big new projects is almost impossible. It means that, for example, the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, are not able to make important structural changes that the new chief of staff – and he's not even that new anymore – wanted to make. He entered into a political crisis and could not do that.

This of course affects civilian establishments as well. The education system, which is a national and mostly public education system, can't make any major shifts, any major reforms, so long as there's no long-term state budget. All these things can sound small but after two years they're very big, they're extremely important. Especially when these two years include a crisis like the pandemic and the economic crisis that accompanies it. The government has been doing a lot of things. Certainly, their vaccination campaign has been extremely successful; it's one of the leaders of the world in that. But dealing with the pandemic itself is generally judged in Israel to be a failure. Over 6000 dead and a haphazard and mixed kind of response by the state with very strict guidelines, but then opening up very fast. All this generally would not happen – at least not to this severity – if there were a more stable and more orderly political system in place.

PITA: What can you tell us about this Ra'am party, the Arab Islamist party who may be playing a kingmaker role in the formation of the next government?

SACHS: One of the most interesting things that happened in this round – and there are a few real changes from the third round – is that Netanyahu has changed his tone dramatically toward the Arab population inside Israel. In the past, he would often target them as an ultimate “other,” as the one in which the right wing needed to rally to prevent the left from bringing the Arab parties into government, which the left also did not intend to do. Netanyahu has now changed his tone completely. They started to flirt between Netanyahu and one element of the erstwhile Joint Arab List. That element is the Ra'am party, which is an Islamic party; it's part of the Muslim Brotherhood in Israel, one-half of it. And the Islamic party, led by someone named Mansour Abbas, has said very clearly that he does not believe that the Arab population in Israel should be beholden to one side or another -- in this case the left wing – that they should be open to negotiating with anyone, depending on what each side would offer. The argument there was a very pragmatic one, that Netanyahu certainly has a chance of becoming prime minister again, and that they should not preclude negotiating with him for the sake of their own population, the Arab population.

They also made an argument for very conservative social views – they are, of course, an Islamist party – as opposed to other parts of the Arab political system who are much more liberal, and some of them even Communist. This has created a very strange situation where an Arab party, in fact an Islamist party, might in fact might be kingmaker and give the victory to Netanyahu and the right wing. It's unheard of. It's very new, and in some ways positive; it allows the Arab population to play politics a little bit more pragmatically in the Israeli political system, but it also, of course, allows Netanyahu to play this game, which is completely cynical on his part, and use this party to legitimize in a sense, voting by the Arab population for him.

PITA: Regardless of whether a Netanyahu-led coalition comes out on top, there has been an increasing right-wing shift in the Knesset, including seats won this time by the ultranationalist Religious Zionist coalition party. But then there are also traditional right-wing parties who are opposed to Netanyahu. What can you tell us about what's happening there, and what some of these shifts mean for Israel?

SACHS: That's a great question. This election is actually very meaningful from a political history point of view. For the first time in a long time, since at least the 70s if not a little bit before, Israel's really not voting on traditional right vs. left questions. And when we say “right vs. left” in Israel, we mean hawkish vs. dovish, especially on questions of relations to Israel's neighbors, including the Palestinians. The right wing less prone to compromise with the Palestinians or others and the left wing more inclined to compromise over territory, in particular.

This time, we do not see that as the organizing principle of this election. The organizing principle has to do with one individual: Netanyahu. And parties in what is known as the change bloc include very right-wing or very hawkish parties, including members of Netanyahu's own party until recently, the Likud. One party, led by Gideon Sa'ar, left the Likud and created a new party that is clearly opposed to Netanyahu – at least as of this morning – and yet it is, of course, right wing and very hawkish. On the other hand, we saw Netanyahu desperate to try to get as many votes as he can to save his prime ministership and also his own legal fate, orchestrating and bringing in not just the far right, but joining them together with the extremely far right, including successors to Meir Kahane, who was a member of

the Knesset in the 80s with an overtly racist, anti-Arab platform. He was at the time in the 80s shunned by everyone else, including the Likud party, which led the right wing then as well. When Kahane spoke in the Knesset, members of the Likud would stand up and leave the chamber so as not to legitimize the vile views of a truly racist party. Now his successors – in slightly different guise and with slightly different rhetoric – are going to be members of the Knesset, and if Netanyahu has his way, part of his coalition, very much with the help of Netanyahu in orchestrating this.

It's not that Netanyahu adopts these views – he's very far from Kahane – but he has legitimized their entrance into the Knesset, and if his predecessors in the Likud stood up and left when Kahane spoke, he's the one who brought Kahane's successors into the Knesset. That's a shameful moment for Israeli democracy, and it's a product really of a system that's beholden to the fate of one individual. That makes him quite desperate to get the majority by any way possible, not only for the sake of the direction of the country – even if Netanyahu left, Israel would probably still have a right-wing majority – but for the sake of his own prime ministership and perhaps getting out of his legal problems.

PITA: Lastly, on that point, what does this election's outcome mean for the charges that he's facing and the trial that's pending?

SACHS: When we started these two years, Netanyahu denied that he was going to elections in part to try and get out of legal trouble. He's now already on trial for three counts of corruption, and the trial will resume shortly in April. After the first round ended, and especially after the second round ended, all pretense was thrown aside. It's very clear that Netanyahu and people in his party will try to push various measures to try to get him out of trial, either by granting legal immunity to a sitting prime minister, or perhaps even firing the attorney general and appointing someone more amenable to dropping the charges. That would have been the case had there been a clear majority for Netanyahu. As of 90% of the vote almost, it doesn't seem like that's the case, so it's unlikely that Netanyahu can do that at the moment. And that in some ways, the most clear and immediate outcome of these elections is that Netanyahu did not get a clear majority to do that. On the other hand, there's not a clear majority to do the opposite. We'll have to wait until 100% are counted, and especially until the coalition negotiations and backroom negotiations are over to see what happens, but it is possible that a majority of the Knesset without Netanyahu would try to make some moves to prevent him from doing these steps. At the moment, at least, Israel remains in limbo. Netanyahu's trial will resume in April and that process – a very long legal process – will continue.

PITA: All right. Natan, thanks very much for talking to us about this today.

SACHS: My pleasure, thank you very much.