

ARETE

RESEARCH PAPER

Coalition building in Israeli politics

March 15, 2019

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ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

When in March 2015 the last election to the Knesset or Israeli Parliament took place, ten parties got to win seats in the legislative body. The winner, Likud, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, held less than a fourth of the seats contested. This fragmentation of the political party system might seem alien to people coming from a European or American context but it isn't something new in Israel's plural society.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the electorate has had a wide variety of options at its disposal, ranging from the most hard-line right wing to the communist and radical left-wing options. But, again in contrast to other democratic systems, the political spectrum doesn't only rely on left-right divisions. The issues regarding the peculiar nature of the State of Israel have been heavily discussed. The role of religion in a Jewish state, the integration of new Jewish immigrants (*olot*), the future of the occupied (or disputed) territories in the West Bank and the foreign relations with Arab states, are, among other matters, dividing topics that make the Israel's political life fragmented and sometimes unstable, but certainly fascinating¹.

It's impossible for a foreigner to understand this intricate political environment if he doesn't

¹ (Peretz & Doron, 1997, pp. 83–117)

understand the origins of the Jewish state. A brief introduction to it will follow. Israel, as most people certainly know, is the nation-state of the Jewish people. Like many European countries, it acquired its modern national consciousness in the 19th century, with the rise of liberal and democratic ideas. Zionism was the political movement that aimed to achieve a national home for the Jewish people. But, contrary to all European nationalist movements, the Jewish people didn't have a place they could call their own territory. Since the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, the Jews had been dispersed throughout the world. They still maintained ties to their religion, costumes and traditions, but the attitude of their own governments had varied from discrimination and exclusion to attempts of assimilation. The way to avoid this kind of behaviour in the future would be, the Zionists argued, to re-establish the Jewish state where its ancient predecessor used to be: in Palestine².

In order to create a Jewish state, the first step is to create an organ that can represent the voice of the people. That organization was the World Zionist Organization, which aimed to be a spokesman for the movement worldwide. Though the objective was clear, the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine, from the first moment, there was division on how to get to that objective. Some supported diplomatic action, while others encouraged emigration to Palestine and land purchase. Also, the territorial extent of the future state was a very divisive issue, along with the role of religion in the new nation. The creators of the WZO certainly didn't want the Zionist movement to start splitting into rival organizations, especially when its aim was to unite the Jews all over the world. That's the reason why they adopted a proportional representation system, in which all the minorities had their say³.

This continued with the establishment of the state in 1948. The first elections, that took place in January 1949, after the months of the War of Independence, maintained the proportional representation system used both in the WZO and in the Assembly of Representatives during the British Mandatory Palestine. As every electoral law, this one has its advantages and its disadvantages: it allows the presence of different and minor groups in Parliament but it also increases fragmentation, making it necessary for agreements to be reached after every election in order to form a functioning government. Again, the plural composition of Israeli society, with immigrants coming from everywhere in the world, and the ideological differences among them, made politicians realize that everyone should feel represented in the new state⁴.

² (Peretz & Doron, 1997, pp. 16–22)

³ (Peretz & Doron, 1997, p. 75)

⁴ (Arian, 2005, pp. 194–195)

Also, the fact that the First Knesset decided not to enact a constitution, rather legislating it chapter by chapter, has made the electoral system to remain similar through the years. There have only been two significant changes in the system, both with the aim to create more stable governments. The first one was the direct election of the prime minister, used only in the 1996, 1999 and 2001, but scrapped afterwards, having failed to provide more stability⁵. The other change has been more permanent: the increase in the electoral threshold for parties to get to Knesset, which has increased from the original 1% to the current 3.25% of the total vote⁶.

But “electoral laws are as much a result as they are a cause of the political culture of a country”⁷. An electoral system influences the political system, but it doesn’t create it. The electoral laws in Israel surely make fragmentation probable, but in the end, this depends on what people vote. That’s why our next point will be related with the different groups of interest and ideologies.

IDEOLOGIES

Before getting into the details of ideological division in Israel, we must realize how Israel was created: in its inception, parties preceded the state. From the beginning of the British Mandate in Palestine, some political parties tried to organise themselves as “comprehensive organizations”, with their own newspapers, labour unions, medical insurances, settlement organizations⁸. They even had their own military organizations which were all dissolved following independence and merged in the IDF.

Left-wing: Mapai

In any case, the most successful in this structuring of society was Mapai, *Palestine Workers’ Party*, which maintained its main role in Israeli politics since before independence until the 1977 elections. The reasons for this success are rooted in their pre-estate organizations that efficiently responded to the different needs new immigrants had upon their arrival to Mandatory Palestine. Zionist Labour parties existed already at the beginning of the 20th century, but Mapai itself appeared in 1930, upon the merge of two previous parties. But in 1920, they had already established the Histadrut, with the aim of defending the interests of Jewish workers in Palestine. Their dominance in the kibbutzim movement and their willingness to compromise with the British also provided them a position as the more “moderate” and left-of-centre party against more radical options. Also, the split

⁵ (Arian, 2005, pp. 184–189)

⁶ https://knesset.gov.il/elections19/eng/about/ElectoralSystem_eng.aspx

⁷ (Arian, 2005, p. 190)

⁸ (Peretz & Doron, 1997, p. 71)

in 1942 of the more pro-Soviet and bi-nationalist Ahut Haanova contributed to this image of moderation⁹.

Right-wing: Herut and Likud

Apart from this centre-left camp, the second most prominent ideological side would be the right-wing, led currently by Likud. Its origins also come from the period of British Mandate in Palestine, with its main leader Zeev Jabotinsky. His leadership in the development of Revisionist Zionism is fundamental during these years and even many decades after his death. His main belief was that the Jewish state in Palestine could only be established through militancy and the use of force, not because the Jews would want this, but because the Arabs wouldn't just let it happen¹⁰. Therefore, supporters of compromise, both with the Arabs and with the British, were undermining the objectives of Zionism.

Because of this, at first their goal was to take over the official institutions, both in Palestine and in the WZO. But, due to their failure on doing so, they finally split from them, since participation was voluntary. They established their own organizations, and most importantly, their own militias: the Irgun or Etzel. These represented a challenge to the Labour-dominated leadership of the Yishuv¹¹. They also created their own labour federation and opposed limitations on immigration and any kind of partition (including the exclusion of the east bank of the Jordan River).

After independence in 1948, these organizations were merged into the IDF, in order to have just one military force in the new state. But the movement lived on with the foundation of Herut. This party became the main opposition until the 1970s. Led by Menachem Begin, former leader of the Irgun, it remained out of government coalitions, with the exception of the national unity government, formed to face the Six-Day War in 1967. After the war, Begin's charismatic leadership helped bring support from North African Jews and poor neighbourhoods, who were becoming increasingly frustrated with Labour policies, that they felt abandoned them. The alliance of Herut with other parties like the Liberals and the State List, a split of Mapai led by Ben Gurion, contributed to improving their image of moderation, leading to their victory in the 1977 elections under the new coalition: Likud. The party has since then dominated Israeli politics¹².

⁹ (Arian, 2005, p. 110)

¹⁰ (Kaplan, 1983, pp. 319–322)

¹¹ (Arian, 2005, pp. 118–119)

¹² (Peretz & Doron, 1997, pp. 105–108)

Centre: General Zionists and the Liberal Party

As we said earlier, parties in Israel tended to have an organization with deep roots in society to promote their own ideas. But the General Zionists, in contrast, didn't normally care about this. They were regarded as the core of the Zionist movement, moving away from the divisions Labour and Religious parties were consolidating from the very beginning. It moved to represent the mainstream of the movement, gaining support from the middle class. As the 1930s emphasised the ideological division between left and right, both within Zionism and worldwide, the internal divisions became wider, some wanting to move to the left, encouraging social welfare, while others wanted to move right-wing¹³.

Divisions have actually been present through all of the movement's history. As the bridge between left and right, in a parliamentary system where coalitions need to be built with every election, the centrist parties are almost always required to choose a side. This already provoked that in 1949, five parties contested the election as "General Zionists". They later merged and became the main opposition but yet again the division on whether to cooperate with the government or not made them vulnerable to criticism from the already mentioned Herut.

Also, the Progressive Party, created in the 30s by German newcomers, was an important competitor for their own electorate. It was more inclined to enter coalitions with Mapai. In any case, they finally merged with the General Zionists to create the Liberal Party, in order to pose a real alternative to Labour out of the more radical Herut. As we've already mentioned, they were finally overtaken by Begin's party and they all merged into Likud.

A third party, the DMC (Democratic Movement for Change), was also part of the centrist parties but focused mainly on electoral reform to make an electoral system based on districts. This would create a more stable system. Like all of its ideological companions, it finally had to cooperate with the mainstream Likud in 1977, and its ideas were dissolved into the bigger coalition¹⁴.

As we see, the different centrist parties in Israeli politics had their moments of influence and were useful to achieve a majority coalitions, but their internal divisions, essentially on who to cooperate with and how, made them vulnerable to bigger parties.

¹³ (Peretz & Doron, 1997, p. 100)

¹⁴ (Peretz & Doron, 1997, pp. 102–104)

Arab parties

Another of the multiple factions in which Israeli electorate divides itself is the Arab-Israeli minority. Before independence, they were about half of the population in the area assigned by the UN to the Jewish state in 1947, but many of them became refugees as a result of the war, both because they fled or were expelled. Once the war was over, the ones who were refugees weren't allowed to come back, being considered potential threats to the new state. In contrast, the ones who stayed did receive Israeli nationality but, as a result of continuing conflicts with other Arab states, they were suspected by society and by its government of being allies of the enemy. They were placed under military government until the 60s and their rights to free movement were severely undermined¹⁵.

However, one thing is political rhetoric and another electoral necessities. Having the right to vote, some parties tried to gain the support of this significant minority (around a fifth of the country's population). The Arab lists sponsored by Mapai were a way in which Labour could increase their majority without the risk of alienating Jewish voters in a joint list¹⁶. These lists were quite successful and certainly helped Mapai maintain its majority throughout the years.

On the other hand, the different communist parties also tended to have both Arab and Jewish members. Maki was the official communist party, supported by the Soviet Union. It supported the 1947 partition plan but it became increasingly divided over Soviet's actions in Eastern Europe and also Soviet backing of Arab nationalist governments. This finally led to a split in 1965, where Rakah became the more anti-Zionist and Arab dominated faction. It later merged with the Black Panthers movement, a Mizrachi movement that appeared in the 1970s in protest to Ashkenazim dominance of the state and discrimination toward them. Afterwards, also the Progressive List for Peace, made up both of Arabs and Jews, became an important factor in Arab-Israeli politics. Its legality was challenged but the courts denied the petition¹⁷. Also, the more moderate Arab Democratic Party, led by Abd Daroushe, a former Alignment MK became in the 1980s the 1990s a key political figure.

But the main problem with all these parties is that they already know they won't be considered potential allies in coalition making. Never have any of the mainstream parties considered a coalition with Arab parties. Though there have been Arab ministers and deputy ministers in recent years, they were all part of the mainstream parties. The history of conflict with Arab countries has influenced Israeli leaders to avoid coalitions with Arab parties, at the risk of being accused of national

¹⁵ (Peretz & Doron, 1997, pp. 55–57)

¹⁶ (Arian, 2005, pp. 137–138)

¹⁷(Arian, 2005, pp. 137–138)

betrayal.

Religious parties

This is probably the most unique of the sections in which Israeli politics can be divided. Centrist, right-wing and left-wing groups exist in every European or Western democracy. Even ethnic minority parties are not uncommon in Eastern Europe. But specifically, religious parties led by religious leaders are very rare. In Israel, in contrast, they have been very influential from minute one of the creation of Zionism.

This is evidently due to the fact that Jews, the national group set to create a new state, weren't only a national group but also a religious one. Mainstream Zionists were generally secularizing and didn't think religion should be an important factor in the new movement. But for some, religion was what made Jews who they were. These religious parties were at first the most vehement opponents of Zionism. They feared that Zionism would drive Jews apart from their religious roots, substituting them by a Jewish secular culture. Also, some considered Jews shouldn't build a state before the coming of the Messiah¹⁸.

The historical party that encompassed this sentiment was Agudat Yisrael, founded in 1921 in order to combat Zionism. They banned any cooperation with Zionists, both in Palestine and Europe, because it considered the movement secularizing. It was very influential in many countries. However, World War II and the Holocaust destroyed its communities in Europe, and, with independence approaching, it had to rethink its position. If they didn't collaborate with Ben Gurion, they would have no influence whatsoever in the new Jewish state and this could be a secular, non-observing one. That's why they reached an agreement in 1947 with Ben Gurion, in which some of their proposals were addressed. They wouldn't get a confessional state but Orthodox Jewish costumes would be respected. Shabbat would be the legal day of rest, food would be kosher in official institutions, and, more importantly, Orthodox Judaism would take care of applying the Jewish law to marriage¹⁹.

The agreement is considered one of the founding pillars of present-day Israel. It enabled the Orthodox community to take part in the state without alienating secularists. It also boosted their participation in the creation of the state, moving the Orthodox from rejection of Zionism to open collaboration in governments.

On the other hand, we have the *haredi* parties that refuse to participate in Zionist organizations

¹⁸ (Arian, 2005, p. 127)

¹⁹ (Medding, 1990, pp. 22–24)

like the WZO, since they don't consider themselves Zionists. These are Aguda Poalei Aguda, Shas and Degel Hatorah. In contrast with Agudat Yisraeli, they don't accept Israel as the Jewish state and they only participate in its politics to influence it, as they also do in some American cities. They supported Labour governments before 1977 in order to gain privileges like exemption from military service while studying in yeshivas and the right to maintain their own educational system independent from the state but funded by it²⁰.

Their non-Zionist (but not anti-Zionist) approach has made them profit of the state and influence it without risking their continuation as a community. Like with centrist parties, splits and reorganizations of its electorate have been very common throughout their history.

The main division has been between Zionist and non-Zionist groups. The National Religious Party was for decades the main religious Zionist Party. Their role was crucial in almost all Labour coalitions from 1949 to 1977 and after that as an ally of Likud. Their religious Zionism makes them supportive of Israel but they want a more explicit relation of the new Israeli culture with religion. For them, being a Jew is defined by religion. Judaism and the Torah is what will make Jews keep their identity²¹.

Even though these ideas aren't shared by the rest of the parties, their advantage in Knesset is that, apart from issues related to religion, the rest of their program is general enough to be accepted by the mainstream parties, both from the right and the left-wing. This remained so until 1967, when the main topic of Israeli politics became what to do with their land. Evidently, their idea was that Jews should settle the lands of Judea and Samaria and that there should be no withdrawal from what they see as Israeli land given by God. Some of these religious Zionist groups also identify Zionism as a tool in the hands of God to bring the Jews back to their land that will bring about the Messianic era.

Their identification of religion with the State of Israel makes it very difficult for them to accept any possible compromise in regard to the West Bank, considering it a blasphemy. This is why from 1967 onwards the Mafdal (NRP) has tended to cooperate with Likud. However, they maintained their identity fearing being absorbed by secular mainstream right-wing.

COALITIONS

As the reader has certainly already noticed, keeping track of Israeli politics isn't an easy task, with parties appearing, splitting, disappearing, changing names, merging... Nowadays, for instance, if you

²⁰ (Arian, 2005, pp. 128–130)

²¹ (Peretz & Doron, 1997, pp. 113–116)

looked at the results of the 1949 elections, all of the parties elected for that First Knesset are now gone, some simply disappearing, others changing its names, structure and ideology. But the importance of these little pieces of a plural society relies on the electoral and political system we explained at the beginning.

If everyone has the chance to enter Parliament and influence politics, then every little party might be essential for future coalition-governments. After each election, the President of Israel, after consultations with MKs chooses the MK who he thinks has the most possibilities of getting elected as Prime Minister. The one chosen is normally the leader of the biggest party but that is not necessarily the case. In 2009, for example, Kadima won the most seats, but in the overall picture, it was more likely that Likud could form a majority. The chosen MK has a limited time to reach a majority coalition agreement and present it to the President, with possible delays, if needed, in the deadline. The majority needed is of sixty one out of a hundred and twenty MKs. Since the size of the Knesset has remained the same since independence, the majority hasn't changed.

But it's not uncommon that PMs try to create broader coalitions that greatly surpass the required minimum. This is done by various reasons. First, the idea is to secure winning some votes in controversial issues, in order not to show a losing face. If you simply give the not-so-essential ministries to minor parties, they will probably show support for the government at a very low cost. In fact, during the period of Mapai dominance, from 1949 to 1977, the main party normally controlled the important ministries: defence, foreign affairs, treasury... You may also want to broaden your coalition amidst an important foreign issue, that being war, peace-negotiations, global economic distress... That was the case of the grand coalitions, which included the main Likud and Labour parties (or their predecessors)²².

But that has only happened in very specific situations. In general, after an election, the main party starts coalition talks with all of its potential allies. When they reach an agreement, they notify the President and then present their government and their program to the Knesset that has to approve it.

During the 70 years of the current State of Israel, many different government compositions have come to power. But, in general, most governments have been formed by one the main parties (Mapai and Alignment until 1977 and then also Likud), some centrist party (General Zionists, Liberals) and religious parties (National Religious Party, Agudat Israel). When Ben Gurion started his mandate as the first PM in 1949, he reached an agreement with the Religious Front, a list that included all of the

²² (Peretz & Doron, 1997, pp. 192–194)

important religious parties, the Progressive Party, considered one of the centrist parties, and the Sephardim and Oriental Communities, also a centrist party but focused on the interests of the Sephardi Jews. Also the Democratic List for Nazareth was included in government, as it was a Mapai-satellite Arab list²³.

Afterwards, Ben Gurion presented his resignation because of internal disputes with religious parties. President Chaim Weizmann gave him again the mandate to form a government. The PM returned to his former allies and reached a new agreement. The divisions between them were very deep: the religious parties wanted strict observance of Shabbat in public services while both Mapai and the Progressive party opposed this legislation. They finally agreed on charging a committee with the duty to study the issue²⁴.

Sometimes it seems difficult to understand how these compromises between totally opposing political forces can be reached. But history again explains it. Zionism was a movement for the ingathering of the Jews in Eretz Israel. That meant uniting them with a common goal: to establish their own state. If that's what they wanted, then their main objective would certainly be to include as many Jews as possible in the new society. Without that, Zionism was impracticable.

Also, the minor parties often preferred to be in government than in opposition, even if they had to sacrifice many of its political ideals. Inside the coalition, they could influence the Prime Minister, be more present in the lives of Israelis, control the State budget, and, more importantly, have the power to bring down the PM if his decisions didn't satisfy them. That bargaining chip is probably what makes Israeli political life so intense.

Other issues were also very controversial in these first years of statehood. The State of Israel was still in formation and, since the First Knesset agreed not to enforce a Constitution, many important aspects were still to be defined. When it comes to education of newcomers, for example, the religious parties had a lot to say. At first they had reached an agreement with Mapai to give Orthodox education for Yemenites but when they settled in permanent housing, they had free choice on education and they tended to choose the secular Histadrut education. This infuriated religious parties and, after some efforts to solve the problem, a new election was called²⁵.

Other issues, like the conscription of non-military service for orthodox women, also were a

²³ (Luebbert, 1986, pp. 106–107)

²⁴ (Luebbert, 1986, pp. 110–112)

²⁵ (Luebbert, 1986, pp. 111–112)

problem for the different governments. But while the Mizrahi orthodox could accept this, the Agudahs didn't, and refused to participate in government until 1977, when Menachem Begin promised them he would eliminate that conscription.

With secular centrist parties, like the General Zionists, Mapai also had its fights in these early years. In this case, they were more centred on economy. While Mapai was in favour of a deep state intervention in economy, through state ownership of companies and controls on imports and exports, the General Zionists wanted a more decontrolled economy. In this aspect, Mapai finally agreed, also because it already saw that Israeli economy needed a boost through encouraging the creation of enterprises.

In any case, as we already mentioned, more radical left-wing parties were excluded from government at this point. Mapam, a pro-Soviet party that had been regarded earlier as a potential ally of Ben Gurion, was explicitly excluded from the coalitions. The reason was its demands to position Israel as an ally of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, breaking away from the policy of alliance with the US.

This structure of alliances remained mainly the same, with some crises, criticism but final agreements, either before or after new elections. But all of this changed, like almost everything in Israel, during the 1967 war. In the weeks before it, PM Levi Eshkol was forced to widen his coalition, creating the first "National Unity Government", which included all parties in Knesset except the communists. This meant that, for the first time the Herut main opposition party made it into government, with its longstanding leader Menachem Begin as minister without portfolio. This war time coalitions continued until 1973, after the Yom Kippur War, when Golda Meir was accused of not having planned the war adequately. In this decade, a realignment of the party system occurred.

In the 60s, Mapai had entered a broad left-wing alliance: Alignment. It proved quite successful and Golda Meir became PM under its label. But after the 1973 War, though it remained the main force, the rest of the parties were angry at its leaders, due to their failure to prevent the war. Because of this, and after several coalition crises, the 1977 election resulted in a victory for the also newly formed Likud. Its leader, Menachem Begin, continued the general trend of alliance with both secular centrist and religious parties.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen through this paper, Israeli politics are both a very interesting field of study and a very complex one. Its electoral system contributes to fragmentation, but also its plural society does so. Compromise is the only possible outcome of elections and divergences among the ministers can be solved either by new negotiations or new elections and then negotiations. Pacts between right and left-wing, religious and secular are difficult but necessary in Israel's political spectrum.

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