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# **Will Netanyahu Corruption Allegations Affect the Results of Israel's Upcoming General Elections?**

Policy Analysis Unit

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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## Policy Analysis Unit

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## Introduction

On 26 December 2018, the Israeli Knesset was dissolved by the ruling coalition and legislative elections were scheduled for 9 April 2019. The upcoming election is being overshadowed however by a recommendation from the Israeli police and public prosecution service to indict Prime Minister and head of the Likud party, Benjamin Netanyahu in three criminal cases, two of which are for corruption. These have recently been submitted to the Israeli Attorney General, Avichai Mandelblit, for a decision.<sup>(1)</sup> This is the first time that a prime minister of Israel and the leader of the largest party in the Knesset elections have had a recommendation from the prosecution to indict him. Yet public opinion polls in Israel indicate that Netanyahu's Likud-led "national camp" will receive the lion's share of the vote in the upcoming elections.

## The Elections System

Israel has a parliamentary political system. Since 1948, the majority of governments have been coalitions as most parties have been unable to obtain a parliamentary majority in the 120-seat Knesset. The nature of the electoral system in Israel thus facilitates party plurality. The system relies on pure proportional representation, and the entire state represents a single constituency. Each party that passes the threshold receives parliamentary representation according to the percentage of votes obtained from the total count. The relatively low threshold for representation has maintained the survival of many parties in the Knesset. From 1948 to 1992, the threshold was just 1% of the vote, rising to 1.5% before the 2006 elections before rising again to 3.25% in 2013.

## The 4th Netanyahu Government

Benjamin Netanyahu has led 4 Israeli governments so far, including 3 consecutive governments since 2009 and his first cabinet between 1996 and 1999. And he is determined to obtain a fifth.

On 4 May 2015, Netanyahu formed his cabinet from 5 right-wing and extreme right-wing parties. These include his own party, Likud; Kulanu, led by finance minister Moshe Kahlon; the Jewish Home party, led by Naftali Bennet; the Haredi-Sephardic-Mizrahi ultra-orthodox Shas party; and the Ashkenazi Haredi ultra-orthodox United Torah Judaism party. These parties are undertaking negotiations with the Palestinian Authority while supporting settlements and emphasizing the Jewish national character of the state rather than the democratic character. In its first year, this government relied on a parliamentary base of only 61 members, after Avigdor Lieberman, head of Yisrael Beiteinu, refused to join the government coalition in the wake of a personal dispute with Netanyahu. However, Lieberman changed his position and joined the coalition government in May

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<sup>1</sup> Revital Hoval, "The State Prosecutor's Office recommends that Netanyahu be tried for bribes" (Hebrew), Haaretz, 19/12/2018, accessed on 1/1/2019 at: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/law/1.6763528>



2016, undertaking the post of Minister of Security. He remained in the coalition government until his resignation on 14 November 2018, blaming his disagreement with Netanyahu and the security cabinet over Israeli policy towards Gaza. While political analysts agreed that the real motive was an attempt to strengthen the party's popularity and increase its chances in the upcoming Knesset elections.<sup>(2)</sup>

Despite the severe crisis posed by Lieberman's exit from the coalition, Netanyahu managed to maintain his government after strenuous efforts with the leaders of the coalition parties, invoking national security. It was later found to be related to the timing that, according to the Israeli Government, would be appropriate to deal with a number of tunnels dug by Hezbollah on the Lebanese-Israeli border. However, the Netanyahu government was soon exposed to a new crisis when the government coalition was unable to agree on a bill to recruit ultra-orthodox (Haredim) Jews in the Israeli army because of the disagreement between the two wings of the United Torah Judaism Party. Yesh Atid led by Yair Lapid and Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, who had previously been pressing for its adoption, abandoned their support for this bill, in order to embarrass Netanyahu and topple the government.

## Bringing Forward the Elections

Several factors contributed to Netanyahu bringing the election date forward, in agreement with his coalition government. The most prominent is Netanyahu's belief that Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, who also heads the public prosecution, will not have enough time in the next three months to make his decision on Netanyahu's criminal files. He also believes that the Attorney General will make his decision within weeks of the results of the Knesset elections, hoping that he will decide not to indict him. Netanyahu appointed Mandelblit as a judicial adviser to the government immediately after he served as government secretary, which at the time aroused serious criticism related to Mandelblit's strong loyalty to Netanyahu that could affect his integrity in matters regarding Netanyahu.

At a time when Netanyahu has repeatedly emphasized his innocence of criminal allegations, he also insisted that he would not resign from his leadership if an indictment is brought against him, especially as there is no legal requirement to do so. He is working in the hope that the Supreme Court will not intervene to force him to resign if he is asked to do so, after winning the confidence of the electorate, especially in the light of the concrete changes in the composition of the Supreme Court taken over the last few years in the interests of the right.

In addition, the timing of the elections increases the difficulties of the opposition in the center and left of the partisan map, which are characterized by weakness and conflict between them. It also

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<sup>2</sup> ACRPS Policy Analysis Unit, "Israeli Cabinet Crisis: Winners and Losers", Situation Assessment, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, 25/11/2018, last accessed 1/1/2019 at: <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Cabinet-Crisis-in-Israel-Winners-and-Losers.aspx>



reduces the chances of forming a broad coalition along the center to left spectrum as called for by many former officials such as Ehud Barak and Tzipi Livni. The Israeli opposition has failed to unify its political discourse and to offer an ideological and political alternative to Netanyahu. It also failed to pick a leader or leaders that come close to Netanyahu's popularity, in an Israeli society influenced by national demagoguery and in a context of diminishing Arab and regional pressure, and Israel's improved international standing based on its stability and development despite the continued illegal occupation. Netanyahu has won three consecutive Knesset elections and the criminal suspicions against him are yet to negatively affect his high popularity ratings.

### **Netanyahu's Advantages**

Over the past decade, Netanyahu, his party and his "national camp" have worked to consolidate Israeli society's shift to the right and extreme right regarding its values and political opinions. He also made efforts to redefine the boundaries of democracy in Israel, limit the opposition in it, and redraw the limits of national consensus, in line with the basic assumptions of extreme right ideology. In recent years, Netanyahu's government has been implementing this extreme right agenda in society, the state and the occupied territories under conditions of Arab regression. He has adopted a policy of aggression against the Palestinian people in the occupied territories and inside the Green Line, and enacted racist, expansionist, anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian laws. Primarily, these laws promote the creeping annexation of the occupied Palestinian territory, by increasing Jewish settlement there in accordance with Israeli law itself and applying Israeli law to the settlements. He did not hesitate to enact the Jewish national law.

In the past four years, Netanyahu's government has expanded, with considerable success, the right and the extreme right's control of centers of power and influence in the state and society, such as the economy, the security services, the police, the media, the Supreme Court, the judiciary, the public prosecution, the education system and universities. This control comes at the expense of the Zionist left.<sup>(3)</sup>

In addition to the domestic achievements made by Netanyahu, he has also made important achievements in Israel's foreign relations during his leadership, in Donald Trump's United States and the Arab countries in particular. The United States' recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv and the withdrawal of the United States from the Iranian nuclear agreement are among some of his greatest successes. Additionally, he has pioneered the normalization of Israel's relations, albeit not completely officially, with some Arab States, with Saudi Arabia at the helm, the strengthening of the unofficial alliance between Israel and Arab states against the so-called threats of political Islam, terrorism and Iran. In addition, he has seen the intensification of conflicts in the Arab world, between and within Arab countries. He has enjoyed the enhanced position of counter-revolutionary forces in many Arab countries, which are bolder than ever in advocating normalization of relations with Israel, no longer demanding the end of the Israeli

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3 Mordechai Kremnitzer, "How Bennett took over the CHE" (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, 31/12/2018, last accessed 1/1/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2GRJDN>



occupation as they grow increasingly oppressive towards their own populations. Moreover, the Palestinians have not been able to end their own division so far, nor have they developed a strategy that compels Israel pay the price of its continued occupation and settlement.

## Alliances and Power Balances

The final form of the electoral lists that will run in the Knesset elections on April 9 is not yet complete. The potential remains for party splits or branching off or the formation of combined electoral lists. In recent months, the idea of establishing a joint list of left and center parties has emerged in an attempt to overcome the “national camp” led by Netanyahu. The idea of forming a joint list of right-wing and far-right parties led by Netanyahu was also suggested, albeit with less enthusiasm. The achievement of either of these objectives seems difficult but cannot be excluded. Yet the right remains a stronger camp and uniting the left and center in a majority is an unenviable challenge.

In recent days there have been three important developments that will have an impact on the Knesset elections. The first was the emergence of an important bloc in the Knesset elections led by Benny Gantz, the former chief of staff of the Israeli army, by forming the Israel Resilience Party to contest the Knesset elections independently, positioned at the center of the Israeli party map, with the Israeli center being a synonym for the secular right.

Another surprising development is Jewish Home Party head Naftali Bennett and party leader Ayelet Shaked announcing they were leaving the party to establish a new right-wing party, to place them on the extreme right of the Israeli party map. The aim of this party is to broaden its popular base to include both secular and religious people who align in their extreme nationalist political positions, particularly with regard to the annexation of large parts of the occupied West Bank to Israel. The establishment of the “New Right” party has further fragmented parties on the far-right, which may lead to some of them missing out on the decisive parliamentary threshold if they do not make alliances.

The third surprising event was that Labor Party Chairman Avi Gabay, in early January 2019, broke up the partnership between the Labor Party and Tzipi Livni parties who had run the previous elections under the moniker of the Zionist camp. This means that as it stands the Labor Party will run in the elections alone. It is not known whether the party led by Tzipi Livni will run in the Knesset alone or will join forces with another party or parties, or if Livni will decide not to run.

## Opinion Polls

All public opinion polls in Israel have so far predicted that the Likud party and the entire right-wing camp led by Netanyahu will win a majority in the upcoming Knesset elections. However, polls also indicate that some parties, especially the far right, may fail to pass the threshold, which could make it difficult for Netanyahu, if he and his camp win, to form a comfortable coalition.



Likud, according to various polls, will get around 27 - 31 seats and face different coalition possibilities for its rivals. The Yesh Atid party, led by Yair Lapid, should receive 14 - 16 seats, while the Israeli Resilience party, led by Benny Gantz are predicted to receive 13 - 15 seats. The Arab joint list should receive 12 - 13 seats and the Zionist camp, led by Avi Gabay's Labor and Tzipi Livni's Hatnuah 8 - 10 (The polls were conducted before the alliance was terminated. The New Right Party, led by Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, has a predicted 6 - 14 seats. The United Torah Judaism Party (made up of Degel HaTorah and Agudat Israel) is set to win 7 seats. The Shas party should receive 4 - 6 seats, the Meretz party is headed for 4-6, Yisrael Beiteinu 4-5, the Geshet party, led by MK Orly Levi-Abekasis (who split from the Yisrael Beiteinu party more than two years ago) looks to win 4 - 5 seats and the Jewish Home party is predicted 4 - 5 seats.

## Conclusion

It seems likely that right-wing and far-right parties will win a majority in the upcoming Knesset elections. Netanyahu's political fate will depend on his ability to convince the leaders of right-wing and far-right parties to form a government under his leadership. Secondly, it will be contingent upon the decision of the Supreme Court of Israel if an indictment has been issued against him, whether they will allow the prime minister to retain his position. In any case, if Netanyahu is forced to resign, it will not have much to do with the balance of power between the parties. The upcoming election campaign will be as heated and dirty as usual; there are frequent party conspiracies and the conflict will be entangled with national security issues. But the constant is the continuation of the strong principles of the Israeli right in a comfortable international environment. The stability of these principles is currently dominated only by the struggle over the influence and history of religious and state affairs; the conflict that successive Israeli parliaments have only succeeded in containing through coalitions of the right.