



The 2019 Elections in Israel

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The forthcoming elections in Israel on April 9, 2019 are being held amidst charges of corruption against the present leadership, and controversies on various policies pursued by the government. The election also bring into new faces in the foray in terms of new political parties and formations.

Israel will be holding an election¹ on April 9, 2019 for the 120 seat Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) through a closed list proportional representative elections.² This will be the twenty-first Knesset elections. In Israel, elections are conducted based on a single nationwide constituency.

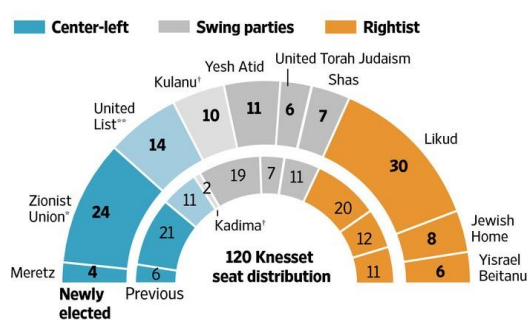


Figure 1 The Knesset post 2015 Elections

In late 2018, the Yisrael Beiteinu party left the coalition which brought down the coalition strength to 61 seats. There were many disputes and controversies about the functioning of the government, the nature of laws that were passed, the ongoing impasse and protests of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, as well as the way the ministerial posts were distributed by the Prime Minister. This was compounded by corruption and bribery charges against the Netanyahu family which led

¹ As per the basic law of Israel, national elections should be held on a Tuesday in the Jewish eighth month (month of *Cheshvan*) four years after the last elections.

² Closed list describes the variant of party-list proportional representation where voters can (effectively) only vote for political parties and thus have no influence on the party-supplied order in which party candidates are elected.

PM Netanyahu to dissolve the Knesset in December 2018 and call for an early election in April 2019.



Benjamin Netanyahu

The present coalition government, headed by Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu (from Likud party established in 1973) was formed in May 2015 as a coalition with the Jewish Home party (established in 2008), United Torah Judaism party (established in 1992), Kulanu party (established in 2014) and Shas party (established in 1984), with 61 seats in the Knesset. Later, the Yisrael Beiteinu party (established in 1999) joined the coalition in 2016, taking the coalition's seat strength to 67 seats.

As the nation is treated to be a single constituency, every party competes for the exact same votes, and parties are represented in the Knesset roughly according to the percentage of the popular vote they receive. Initially, the original threshold of winning a seat in the Knesset was 1 percent of the total population, which was raised to 3.25 percent in the last elections in 2015, which represented approximately 137,000 votes. This system allows smaller parties representing varied interests to compete in the elections, and gain seat in the Knesset.³ The present system has ensured that no single party can create a government on its own. However, the leader of the largest party is generally regarded as the winner and has almost always formed a coalition.

Contending Parties and Main Campaign Issues

Election campaigning has begun in Israel and has brought in three new parties in the foray. Portraying itself as a contender against the Likud, the Israel Resilience party, founded in December 2018 and led by Benny Gantz, has turned out to be very popular amongst the masses. He is a former Chief of the General Staff of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).

Former education and justice ministers in the Netanyahu cabinet, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, have jointly formed their own party, the Hayamin Hehadash party (New Right party), in December 2018, which is likely to attract both the secular and religious voters. Another former defence minister from Netanyahu's cabinet, Mr. Moshe

³Sasley, Brent E., "Israel's upcoming election could produce even more political parties. Here's why", *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/01/04/with-israeli-elections-coming-up-heres-what-you-should-know-about-the-party-system/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.36c700793785, Accessed on February 23, 2019

Ya'alon, has formed his party, Telem. He was dismissed from the cabinet in 2016, and he formed the party in January 2019.

Other parties contending are the Yesh Atid party led by Yair Lapid (established in 2012) and the Labor party led by Avi Gabbay (established in 1968). These parties represent centrist and leftist ideologies. The coalition parties under PM Netanyahu symbolise the Zionists, orthodox and rightists. With the rising popularity of the Israel Resilience party, there are chances of more parties being formed or forging coalitions to oust the present Netanyahu's coalition. To date, Israel's electoral history has witnessed coalitions led by either the Labor or the Likud party.



Benny Gantz

There is a small coalition of groups like the United Torah Judaism (established in 1992) and the Joint List⁴, which represents various religious and Arab factions. These parties along with other smaller and medium parties are expected to play a major role in creating the next government.

Allegations of corruption and bribery against Mr. Netanyahu and his family and ongoing investigations has been one of the reason for having an early election, as well as remain to be a principle issue in the ongoing election campaigns. Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit has declined Mr. Netanyahu's request to delay in delivering his decision against the latter on bribery charges. Mr. Netanyahu had requested to delay till the end of the elections. There is the view that if after elections, the courts deliver a verdict, charging Netanyahu with corruption, he would have to step down, and there might be another election by next year. This is why some observers are calling the present elections as 'mid-term elections'.⁵

With the departure of Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu Party, the strength of the Likud-led coalition has reduced. The Netanyahu government has also been criticised over the issues of the impasse over the Gaza Strip and the violent Palestinian protests, as well as the role of Hamas in the protests. This is a major issue in the election campaign. Another issue is the recruitment of ultra-orthodox personnel in

⁴ Presently, there are four Joint List coalitions of smaller parties. One coalition represent the leftist and communist parties, and the other three coalitions represent Arabs, Pan Arabism and Anti Zionism.

⁵ Gil Hoffman, "10 predictions for Israeli politics in 2019", *The Jerusalem Post*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Crystal-ball-10-political-predictions-for-2019-576300> as accessed on February 25, 2019

the IDF as well as in other government institutions, which has faced some opposition in the Knesset. The Israeli response to Hamas' aggression is also an issue. Politicians have also been critical of Netanyahu's foreign and defence policies. Recent reports indicate that Benny Gantz and Yesh Atid, who have been critical of Netanyahu before, have now shown interest in forging a coalition with the Likud party. The situation remains fluid, as smaller, medium sized parties are in the process of leaving older coalitions, and forging new alliances.

Candidates in the present elections are silent with regard to the Middle East peace process and the next government might not propose any radical change with regard to it. For India, any change in government will not have any major impact on India-Israel relations. Any government in power in Israel would mostly maintain a positive relation with India, the largest defence importer from Israel. The Likud party as well as Netanyahu personally continue to retain a large support base, and it is unlikely that the forthcoming elections will see major change in the number of seats it had gained in 2015 (30 seats out of 120 seats), in the event of an indictment coming before the elections. Arab parties are unlikely to join a coalition government led by Likud, Gantz or Atid, there might not be any major change in the nature of governance in Israel. As West Asia goes through political instability, a stable government in Israel remains to be the need of the day.

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