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THE ISRAELI CROSSROADS: WHERE TO?

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Israel is now past its second elections this year, and still the chances for a wide and stable coalition seem slim. How did Israel come to this point? Where could Israeli politics go next?

(Social) Security Please

Until 2019, almost every Israeli election campaign was mainly decided based on security. Yes, Israelis have their share of other social and economic problems, but the main question for them has always been the question of survival. Israeli security policy could be roughly divided into external and domestic security. External security is Israel's policy towards the neighboring Arab states militias such as Hezbollah. Domestic security is Israel's policy towards the Palestinian governments in the West Bank and Gaza, and the Israeli willingness to make territorial and other concessions in favor of a future Palestinian state. When Israelis say "leftist", they do not refer to social-economic standings, but to a security policy orientation: a leftist is willing make larger concessions to the Arabs, in favor of a long-lasting peace agreement. A rightist is less generous and more skeptical about the need or the feasibility of such an agreement.

First signs of a change revealed themselves in 2011. A group of Tel-Avivi middle-class students set up tents in Rothschild Boulevard, in protest against the obscenely high rent in Tel Aviv and their inability to support themselves, despite holding jobs in parallel to their studies. This local initiative quickly grew into a unique protest movement which held demonstrations in all the major urban centers against the “social injustice” and high cost of living. Unlike past movements, it was a fluid group of people with several prominent leaders but with no hierarchy. They refrained from affiliating themselves with any party, and addressed social and economic problems which were previously mostly ignored.

Social issues grew in significance in the following election campaign, with parties adopting a more economic and social discourse. The right spoke mainly about reducing taxes and increasing competitiveness, while the left promised to increase government spending in support of people in need. It seemed like the interest in social issues began to die out again in subsequent years, but it appears to have remained with us after all.

We don't Need No State Religion

Alongside the rise of economic concerns, another social issue which became widely spoken is Israel's state religion. Currently, Israel has a rabbinical institute which is officially entrusted with religious matters such as weddings, burials and wakes, providing kosher certificates to kosher restaurants and more. This institution is Orthodox in its orientation, and is often perceived as coercing and unwelcoming for secular Jews, or religious Jews from non-orthodox sects.

In later years, secular Jews became increasingly angry and wary of what they call “Hadata”, perhaps best translated as “religionization”. Many Israelis feel that the government gives larger and larger portions of its seats and budgets to religious institutions, and this has ramifications which are present in everyone's private life. For example, parents complain that educational textbooks in schools involve more and more religious

contents. Commuters and people without means criticize the absence of public transportation on Shabbat due to religious restrictions. Feminist organizations protest against the increasing trend of excluding women from private or even public events in religious centers.

And indeed, the Likud, unwilling to share its leadership with center and left parties, chose to make a political pact with the hard-right and the religious parties. But this time, an unexpected challenge came to Netanyahu – from his own political wing.

Lieberman for Liberty

Avigdor Lieberman came to Israel from Moldova in 1978 and joined Israeli politics a bit after. He worked as the Likud party's Director-General from 1993 to 1996, under Netanyahu himself. He left the Likud in 1997 following his disappointment with Netanyahu's concessions to the Palestinians in the Wye River Memorandum. In 1999, he formed his own party, "Israel Beytenu" ("Israel Our Home"). His unique party represents the secular but hard-right public of Israel, and chiefly the Israelis from the former Soviet states. His party is both aggressive towards the Palestinians, but also very liberal and anti-religion when it comes to domestic affairs.

Lieberman traditionally joined the Likud's coalitions with the religious parties, out of their mutual interest in supporting a strong Israeli political right bloc. But in these last elections Lieberman decided to drop a bomb, and promised that Israel Beytenu will not join a coalition with the religious parties. Instead, he insisted, the Likud must form a national unity government with Blue and White. While only holding 5 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, Lieberman's veto was enough to deny from Netanyahu the necessary 60 seats required to formulate a government. For the first time in Israeli history, the main issue at hand became the need for a secular government, rather than a rightist or a leftist one.

Following the second election campaign of 2019, Lieberman's tenacity and eagerness made him significantly stronger, and brought him up

from 5 Knesset seats to 8. The Likud, on the other hand, dropped from 39 seats to 32 only, making it the second largest party after Blue and White (33 seats). Former Likud supporters which grew tired of the party's ties with religious parties chose to vote for Liberman, as well as leftists which care more for religious coercion than they care about foreign issues. People grow increasingly wary of the smaller parties' blackmailing and the reluctance of the two major parties (Likud and Blue and White), which together hold more than 60 seats, to work together. Liberman became the man of the hour in Israeli politics.

Now, the conundrum seems far from over. Netanyahu is unwilling to hand over the leadership to Blue and White, not only because he wants to preserve his political power but also because he is facing serious legal charges. While the leaders of Blue and White openly support a national unity government with the Likud, they strongly oppose doing it with Netanyahu. They insist that he must resign to face his charges prior to the establishment of any such government. And without Liberman, neither the left nor the right hold enough seats to establish a government on their own.

So Now What?

Netanyahu faces charges in cases known as cases 1000, 2000 and 4000. The cases revolve around political corruption. The first hearing is scheduled for Wednesday 2nd Oct., and will likely be spread over 4 days. The hearing will decide whether Netanyahu will be indicted or not. From there, most commentaries suggest the following scenarios:

1. A national unity government: In case Netanyahu will be forced out of public life due to an indictment, or if Blue and White would agree to partner up with him, such a government is likely to be formed. It is important to remember that while Liberman is keen on such a government, his presence in it is not required (the two largest parties share enough seats to leave all others

- out of the coalition, should they so desire).
2. A surprising alliance: since both blocs are just almost big enough to form a government, all it takes to realign the coalition map is a small shift of parties from one side to the other. For example, should the religious and Arab parties side with Blue and White, they could form a government without the Likud or Liberman. Alternatively, the traditionally leftist Labor party could join Netanyahu's right-wing coalition.
 3. A third election campaign: if all else fails, some prominent political figure such as Naftali Bennett already discuss the option that the Knesset be once more dispersed and third elections will take place. It is unclear whether this option will benefit or damage the Likud. On one hand, many Likud supporters which felt safe enough to vote for Liberman might now be more inclined to go back home. On the other hand, should Netanyahu leave the Likud soon, the party might be forced to lead a campaign leaderless and divided. One thing is clear - this is the least popular option among everyone.