

Position Paper

Netanyahu: Recovering the Initiative through a Government of National Unity

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It initially seemed unlikely that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would suddenly retreat from his previous decision to dissolve the parliament and call for early parliamentary elections. However, he formed a government of national unity by bringing in the Kadima party, which represents the main opposition party in the parliament. All the public opinion polls conducted recently in Israel confirmed that the Likud Party, headed by Netanyahu, would be the biggest winner in this election, and predicted that it would receive twice as many seats as the party following it. What, thus, are the internal justifications and external factors that persuaded Netanyahu and Shaul Mofaz, Chairman of the Kadima party, to override their differences and form this government of national unity, thus preventing the dissolution of the Knesset and early elections at the last moment?

Expanding the Margin of Internal Manoeuvre

Internal factors played a central role in the formation of the government of "national unity" as it was announced suddenly just hours before the law of parliament dissolution was to be passed and early elections to be called. Early elections had been scheduled for 4 September 2012. It is apparent that the formation of a government of national unity would not have been possible had it not been for the large concessions made by Shaul Mofaz. Although he currently has the largest number of seats in the Knesset, fears increased following frequent public opinion polls indicating the collapse of his party's representation in the next parliament. The polls predicted that Kadima will get only ten seats in the next parliament though it has 29 in the current parliament. Kadima's fears are illustrated by the fact that it had tried relentlessly to defuse the passing of the law of parliament dissolution, which is unusual, since opposition parties always seek to overthrow governments by passing laws dissolving parliaments. Aside from one ministerial portfolio, Kadima gained nothing substantial from joining the government although its seats in the parliament outnumber those of the Likud party. With regards to the unity government programme, Kadima has received nothing to save its face except for a loose commitment to enact a law obliging the government to recruit students of religious schools for the army, and a promise to seek to change the way of governance.

Forming a unity government gives Netanyahu the ability to achieve a number of objectives at the domestic level. Including Kadima in the government grants him the support of the largest parliamentary base in the history of Israel as 94 out of 120 members of parliament support it. In other words, the new government will enjoy political stability until the normal date of elections, 31 October 2013, arrives. Simultaneously, such an expanded government will contribute to empowering Netanyahu to undermine his coalition partner, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the "Israel Is Our Home" party, which was considered the second largest party in the ruling coalition before Kadima joined. Over the three years of Netanyahu's government, Lieberman deliberately bid against Netanyahu, adopting attitudes and policies inconsistent with the orientations of his party in order to gain more supporters in the right-wing camp. For example, Netanyahu was quite frustrated when Lieberman defeated secret U.S. efforts to settle the dispute with Turkey by launching fiery statements against the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan; and thus Turkey stopped cooperating with the United States. Netanyahu could not take action against Lieberman because the latter's withdrawal from the ruling coalition would mean the overthrow of the government because it would lose the parliamentary majority.

On the other hand, the expansion of government helps Netanyahu confront extortion carried out by religious movements whether by employing their political power to change the nature of the relationship between religion and state and passing more laws that strengthen the religious identity of the state, or by demanding a greater financial allocation for religious, social and educational institutions while the government cuts the budgets of the rest of the public. Moreover, the formation of a unity government allows him to face the growing challenge posed by the religious Zionist trend within his own Likud Party, represented by the "Jewish Leadership" group led by Moshe Feiglin. Netanyahu was recently surprised by the amount of support the group received, as it succeeded in winning the support of tens of thousands of religious settlers that joined the ranks of the Likud. They will be able to contribute to determining who the Likud MPs

in the next Knesset will be. In fact, an opinion poll conducted among those affiliated with the Likud Party has confirmed that in the event internal elections are held to choose a list of party candidates for the elections, the overwhelming majority of Likud lawmakers in the next parliament will be affiliates of the "Jewish Leadership" although the group tends to adopt very extreme political positions, and thus will reduce Netanyahu's ability to manoeuvre in the international arena. For example, Feiglin calls for the imposition of Jewish sovereignty over the al-Aqsa Mosque and Israel's withdrawal from the United Nations. He went as far as calling for the application of the methods used by Hitler to deal with the Palestinians. Netanyahu realised the power of "Jewish Leadership" and had to thwart a proposal made recently by the Executive Committee of the Likud party to appoint one of his associates as Chairman of the Executive Committee. He was forced to agree to another date for the selection of the president. He hopes that the formation of a unity government will give him enough time to change the ideological mindset of Likud members through the inclusion of large groups of Likud affiliates.

The Economic Factor: The "Strict" Budget

The economic factor has played an important role in persuading Netanyahu to form a unity government and retreat from the idea of early elections. It is well known that Israel's draft budget for 2013 is scheduled to be ratified in August 2012. It was expected that in the event of early elections, Netanyahu would be obliged to submit the draft budget in a way that contributes to the expansion of his popularity, which would mean tax cuts, more subsidies for the poor, and other measures. However, in light of the crisis afflicting the global economy, and consequently the Israeli economy, these actions would lead to inflation and reduction of growth level. Luckily, with the formation of a government of unity and elimination of the idea of early elections, it is no longer necessary for Netanyahu to include electoral temptations in the draft budget. This was pointed out by the Minister of Finance, Yuval Steinitz, when he stated that the formation of a unity government would help him pass a "strict" budget.

The Iranian File: The Increasing Likelihood of War

It is rather obvious from recent warnings from Yuval Diskin, the former head of the internal intelligence service, "Shin Bet", and Meir Dagan, the former head of Mossad, that Netanyahu believes eliminating the Iranian nuclear programme is the ultimate goal of his life. It transpires from Diskin and Dagan's statements that Netanyahu's plans to attack Iran's nuclear project were foiled by the reservations of heads of security services. In addition, Netanyahu believes that carrying out a strategic operation of this magnitude requires the existence of a broad-based government. Accordingly, the formation of a unity government contributes to founding an atmosphere conducive to his decision to strike Iran for the following reasons:

1. Netanyahu's assumption stems from the fact that the presence of Mofaz on his side in the government will reduce the opposition of the security establishment to the idea of a strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, particularly the Chief of Staff of the Army, Beni Ganz, without whose consent no major military action can be launched. There is a consensus in Israel that Mofaz has great influence on Ganz because Ganz is indebted to him for placing him at the helm of military leadership. When Mofaz was Chief of Staff and Defence Minister, he was especially keen on promoting Ganz, and thus sustained much criticism.
2. An Israeli government based on a broad parliamentary base will be able to launch military action against Iran, with less internal opposition.
3. An Israeli government with large parliamentary support can exercise pressure on the Obama administration to impose sanctions on Iran and ensure that it is forced to halt its nuclear programme. It can also win U.S. support if it opts for a pre-emptive military strike in case of failure of the political process and sanctions. As unveiled in Israel, the Netanyahu government has set 1 July 2012 as the date for the end of diplomatic efforts to persuade Iran to halt its nuclear program, after

which Israel would be free to decide. It is certain that that Obama, who will be at the height of his campaign, will be obliged to support Israel if it decides to strike Iran on the grounds that such a step would render him the support of Jewish organisations.

The Continuation of Settlements

Kadima's admittance into the government will not contribute to any changes in the manner in which Israel deals with the efforts made to resolve the conflict with the Palestinian people. Shortly after joining the government, Mofaz blamed the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, for the stalemate reached in the peace settlement process. He also offered Netanyahu "creative formulas" to help legitimise the seizure of Palestinian land by Jewish settlers through the enactment of laws to prevent the intervention of the Israeli Supreme Court. Simultaneously, shortly after joining the "unity" government, a number of Kadima MPs rushed to present proposals calling for the establishment of more "urban settlement" in the West Bank, ensuring the assimilation of tens of thousands of settlers.

Self-restraint towards Gaza

Contrary to the findings of most Arabic analyses, the joining of Kadima will not substantially affect Israeli behaviour towards Gaza Strip as Israeli policy towards it since the outbreak of Arab revolutions is no longer linked to partisan structure or the identity of the ruling Israeli coalition. In fact, according to research conducted by prestigious research centres in Israel, there is a unanimous agreement that decision-making circles in Tel Aviv have realised that they must take into account the possible responses of Arab public opinion before deciding to carry out military action in Gaza Strip. The circles of strategic assessment in Tel Aviv base their assumption on the fact that any Israeli military operation in Gaza Strip could lead to the deterioration of relations with Arab countries that are important to Israel, particularly Egypt, especially because the strategic gains Israel could get from military action against Gaza Strip less significant than the potential damage caused by the deterioration of relations with Egypt.

Confronting Hezbollah

It is almost certain that any Israeli military plans against Hezbollah will be linked to Tel Aviv's intentions for Iran as the dominant assumption among decision-making circles in Israel is that Iran will rely primarily on Hezbollah to respond to any Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. There are two points of view prevailing in Israel regarding Hezbollah: some believe that Israel should launch a pre-emptive strike against Hezbollah before attacking Iran to curtail its ability to attack Israel; others maintain that there is a substantial possibility that Hezbollah will not be dragged into confrontation with Israel, and thus an attack against Iran will be awaited. It can be assumed that Kadima's accession to the government will promote the second camp for sure for Kadima was at the helm of government during the Israeli war on Lebanon in July 2006, and its leaders are aware of the extent of damage done to Israel as its deterrence capacity eroded when it failed to subdue Hezbollah and was forced to end the war through an agreement safeguarded by the United Nations.

Conclusion

Internal factors are essential in providing the conditions for the birth of a national "unity government" in Israel. However, the formation of this government will play an important role in helping Netanyahu achieve his objectives in terms of confronting what he considers "existential risk", particularly Iran's nuclear file.

