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## THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS: WHICH IS WHICH AND WHO IS WHO?

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The 21st elections for the Israeli Knesset are due for the mid-April. These elections bring a multitude of new parties, a shift in the political blocs and perhaps even a political big bang, which could lead to a long-term change in the Israeli party map. With the candidate lists finalized and submitted, it is finally a good time to ponder over who might next lead the Democratic-Jewish state.

### **The Likud Party: The King is Dead?**

The conservative right party led by Benjamin Netanyahu has been leading the Israeli coalition since 2009. Back then they held 28 out of the 120 seats in the Knesset, and were later able to maintain their 30-31 seats in the election campaigns of 2013 and 2015. Some of the younger Israeli individuals, such as yours truly, can hardly remember a time without Netanyahu as Prime Minister. However, recent developments may have reshuffled the cards.

The Likud's main problem is the rebirth of the Israeli center, in the form of the new "Israel Resilience Party". The promising movement, which came to life in December 2018, later merged with the second-largest center party "Yesh Atid" into the grand union of "Blue and White". The union went toe-to-toe with the Likud in the polls throughout February, and as of now it

seems that it surpasses the Likud with an estimated average of 36 seats. To make matters worse for the Prime Minister, just 40 days before the elections the Attorney General of Israel announced his decision to pursue an indictment against Netanyahu on bribery, fraud and a breach of trust in several cases he was allegedly involved in. Currently Netanyahu has no intention of resigning, but nevertheless this might mean that even if he becomes Prime Minister once more, he would later be forced to resign in order to face the charges, leaving the Likud without a strong and popular heir. This fact does not go unnoticed even by some eager Likud supporters, who are reluctant to throw their vote away.

Netanyahu is doing everything he can to combat these trends, and is not yet left without cards to play. The Likud maintains its position with 26-32 seats in the polls, and many of the political right parties announced that they would recommend Netanyahu for Prime Minister when the elections will be over. To further improve his odds, Netanyahu has launched a media offensive against the Attorney General which supposedly caved to the Likud's political rivals, as well as against the leaders of "Blue and White". He also went out of his way to support a merge among lesser right parties which were in danger of not passing the electoral threshold in order to reinforce his ability to form a coalition. Only time will tell if 40 days is what Netanyahu needs in order to make his way back into office.

### **Blue and White: Long Live the King(s)?**

In 2013, some considered the new "Yesh Atid", led by the former media person Yair Lapid, to be the promise of the elections. He presented himself as the moderate alternative to Netanyahu's Machiavellistic politics and willingness to align with far-right and ultra-orthodox parties. Yesh Atid strove to dismiss the conservative "left-versus-right" debate, in favor of what they referred to as "new politics". Lapid became the knight of the good, secular people of the center, those who are tired of having their interests sold out by politicians.

Although Yesh Atid reached a respectful second place in the 2013 elections with 19 seats in the parliament, Netanyahu was skillfully able to curb the party's rising popularity. He brought Lapid into his coalition and, knowing that he had no political expertise, gave him the crucial yet

extremely demanding Ministry of Finance. By the elections of 2015, Yesh Atid's seats dropped to 11. The party was forced to go to the opposition and it seemed as though it might become just another second-tier party in the Israeli harsh political scene.

A significant reinforcement rushed to the Israeli center in December 2018, in the form of Benny Gantz. This former commander of the Israeli army was praised as a successful military leader and manager. His accomplishments, at the side of his impressive and yet calm kind of appearance, created a major interest in his political vision. Like Lapid before him Gantz condemned the radical and aggressive nature of the Israeli leading politicians and called to return Israel to its more moderate, institutional and united days. He established his own party, the "Israel Resilience Party", which scored an approximate 12-22 seats in the polls of January and February.

Given the similarity of their agendas, a unification between Lapid and Gantz seemed natural to many of their voters, and it predicted that such a union could be a whole greater than the sum of its parts. The politicians heeded the call and just before the electoral candidate lists were closed, the two parties formed a union named "Blue and White".

The new movement is now estimated to be the largest party of the elections, with 35-36 seats. However, it is still unclear whether the turnout will be as high as expected, and whether the union could raise enough support among other parties to become the first coalition leader from the Israeli center.

### **The New Right**

Currently winning 5-9 seats in the polls. This party is led by Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked. Bennett was a wonder-boy of the religious Zionism. After an impressive career in the military and in business entrepreneurship, Bennett entered politics and join the Likud party. Bennett joined forces with Ayelet Shaked, a female conservative right-winger from Tel Aviv, and together they moved during 2012 to the Jewish Home Party. They successfully transformed this entity from a fringe religious-right party into a much more popular group with 12 seats in 2013 and 8 in 2015, receiving votes even from moderate rightists tired of

the Likud's political pragmatism. Currently, Bennett is the Israeli Minister of Education, while Shaked occupies the Ministry of Justice.

Now, Bennett and Shaked left their party a second time in order to form "The New Right", a political party striving to unite religious and secular right-wingers, who hold sacred the Jewish aspect of Israel and reject any idea of a Palestinian state. They hope that their departure from the often provocative and radical elements within The Jewish Home would allow them to bring the religious and conservative Zionism into the Israeli mainstream.

### **The Israeli Labor Party**

The left party which was for long the largest party in Israel has never seen worse days. Since the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in 1995, the party has been gradually losing its power and current polls predict that it would only gain 5-8 seats in the next Knesset. Avi Gabbay, the current leader of the party, is sometimes accused of abandoning the left for the sake of populism and was also criticized for disbanding the party's partnership with Hatnuah, another party which disintegrated following the end of the merger.

The party slightly improved its weak position in recent weeks, following primaries which brought very popular figures to the head of the list, in addition to the rise of Blue and White and a hope for a new, center-left coalition.

### **Conclusion: Israel is going center**

Following the departure of Ariel Sharon from the Likud party in 2005, the political center became a major phenomenon in Israel. While the Israeli left is long gone, and the right is now facing danger given the shaky position of its leadership, the current polls show that the center found its way back to the front.

Could this be the dawn of a new political age in Israel? Can a recently-established union between two relatively new parties assume immediate leadership of such a complex state? And what would become of the Likud in such a new era? Only time will tell. But one thing is certain – the 2019 elections are among the most interesting in Israel's history.