An Overview of the Government Coalitions in Israel in the Face of An Approaching Crisis

By Özgür Dikmen

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Abstract

In the midst of a political outbreak, coalition government in Israel is facing a challenge and cards are being reshuffled in a way that could change the whole face of the Israeli government. One of the main tenets of Israel's parliamentary politics is its coalitional patterns which is an apparent reflection of the dividedness of the Israeli society. Rifts between the religious and the secular sections of the Israeli society, as well as those between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews are shaping factors in Israeli politics. The secular-religious rift in the Israeli society and politics has recently been an important factor. While concessions given to ultra-orthodox Jews generate an active reaction from secular Israelis, these concessions provide Israeli politicians a helping hand by guaranteeing the coalitional support of religious parties. While politicians rely on the votes of secular Israelis, they also appear to be in dire need of support from the ultra-orthodox religious parties. In this paper, the reasons behind that paradoxical situation is analysed on the basis of religious-secular rift in Israel and its influence on Israeli coalitional patterns.

Introduction

A government crisis is nearing in Israel. Due to allegations of corruption about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the government might fall and this will mean the renewal of elections and another period of government formation. Another possibility regarding the future of the government is the appointment of a new prime minister from Likud. A third scenario is that Netanyahu might simply stay in power with the support of his base and supporters around himself particularly considering the "fragile" security situation around himself. What will determine the fate of the running government is the coalition partners of Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party. That process, like many other in the past, will probably witness the formation of new camps and alliances in the Israeli political landscape. There is no single Israeli election after which a new coalition as well as new camps have not been formed. This can be explained in relation to Israeli society which is defined as "the society of cleavages" in the literature. In this paper the reasons behind coalitions being the norm in Israel have been analysed, with particular focuses on the nature of political movements in Israel and divisions in the Israeli society.

In the history of Israel, coalitions have always been the norm in politics. There has been no election after which a single party founded the government, and there has never been a coalition in the Israeli history founded by less than three coalition partners. That picture clearly reflects the fragmentations in the Israeli society that requires a rather socio-political approach to the coalition politics in Israel.

Israeli system of government is defined as parliamentary democracy with a dominant party system and the cabinet leads the Knesset by preparing and directing the legislation, setting the Knesset agenda, formulating policies and controlling the budget. (Nachmias, 1974) Therefore, cabinet stands as the main legislative body but it continually needs to guarantee the support of majority in the Knesset that is composed of 120 members. However due to the fragmented structure of the Israeli political

landscape, that support is not easy to obtain and neither sustainable (Peretz & Doron, 1997). In order to understand that issue, there is a need to look at the fragmentations in the Israeli society in greater detail.

"Nearly 70 years after the establishment of the modern State of Israel, its Jewish population remains united behind the idea that Israel is a homeland for the Jewish people and a necessary refuge from rising anti-Semitism around the globe. But alongside these sources of unity, (there is a deep friction) not only between Israeli Jews and the country's Arab minority, but also among the religious subgroups that make up Israeli Jewry." (Pew Research Center, 2016) Israeli society is well-known as a highly fractured society with deep rifts between different groups. According to Sammy Smooha "the population of Israel is divided along five major lines of cleavage: political stream, religious observance, class, ethnicity, and nationality." (Smooha, 1993) Of those, religious observance and ethnicity appear to have gained more prominence than others in terms of political frictions. Religious observance points out to a deep line of division that does not exist only between the secular and the religious camps of the Israeli society but also between various Jewish religious groups. Another apparent line of division in the Israeli society is ethnicity. The diasporic backgrounds that different Jewish individuals are aligned with do constitute an element of division within the society. The most well-known is the Ashkenazi-Sephardi split that connotes the dominance of white European and secular Ashkenazi Jews over Jews who come from South European and Middle Eastern countries from a rather traditional setting.

Very often Israel is defined as a party-state and the political organization of the Israeli society is on the basis of these semi-structural rifts that determine the political leanings and voting behaviours of individuals to a great extent. At the very root of these rifts lay the fact that the majority of Israeli society is composed of Jews who come from various parts of the world with starkly different, sometimes violently clashing,

worldviews. These clashes do set the political trends and identities of Israeli individuals in a reactionary way (Lehmann & Siebzehner, 2006). Particularly the religious rift is one of the two deeper rifts that reflects the political and actual conflicts amongst Israeli Jews, even more than that of between Arabs and Jews (Smooha, 1993). "Overlapping cleavages in Israeli society were traditionally identified with the divide between Arabs and Jews (religion, income, societal status, and ethnicity). In contemporary Israel, the Arab parties are now in the same camp as Labour. The Jewish-Arab divide, while still strong enough, is beginning to break down; the religious-secular cleavage is on the rise." (Freedman, et al., 1999) Therefore, a more comprehensive analysis of the coalition patterns in Israeli politics, the clashes on secularism and religiosity is reflective of the actual situation.

Secular-Religious Conflict in Israel and Its Influence on the Political Landscape

Recent times have witnessed a steep increase in the demonstrations of secular Israelis who discontent over various changes that are happening in the country from the regulation of official holidays to the imposition of a nationalist-religious agenda on the education system (Strenger, 2016). From one of the biggest demonstrations that took place on On February 14, 1999, in Jerusalem in which 300,000 Israeli seculars participated to the recent divided and sudden protests of ultra-orthodox Jews, the religious-secular divide in Israel has come to be one of the hottest topics in the soci-political agenda of the country. According to public opinion polls, the Jewish-Israeli internal divide is a very critical issue and it is even sharper than the clashes between Arabs and Israeli Jews (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Israeli Jewish identity reflects certain degrees of complexities in terms of it relationship to Judaism as a faith and Jewishness as a nationality. However as Jewishness cannot merely be defined based on religion and nationality, both secularity and religion come to lose their conventional meanings. Being a Jew connotes both being the part of a national as well as having a certain religion. Despite the fact that Jews from different backgrounds do live in the same country under a state, there are a number of indicators regarding the existence of totally different social worlds and values shared by different groups defining themselves as either secular or with a degree of religiosity. That division involves a sharp debate regarding the definition of Jewishness. That is especially the case between different Jewish religious groups and those Israelis who define themselves as seculars. According to the figures provided by Pew Research Centre, that view reflects a deeply divided society in terms of the role of religion in public life depending on how one defines Jewishness. When examined from the lens of secular-religious divide, almost all Israelis fall under either one of the categories of ultra-orthodox, religious, traditional and secular. All of these, beside the "secular" category, reflect a degree of religiosity and, obviously, religious Jews are also deeply divided amongst themselves. While 40% identify himself/herself as secular, 23% says he/she is traditional that connotes a certain reception of Judaic core beliefs and values and blending it with a rather secular life style. 10% of Israelis defines themselves as religious and that connotes the observance of Judaism but sharing the same social space with all other groups while 8% identifies themselves with ultra-orthodox life style that means a strict observance of Judaic rules and principles and living in segregated spaces (Pew Research Center, 2016).

History of A Friction

The history of intra-Jewish friction in Israel does not go too far. Since the very beginning -even much before its establishment- Israel has always been considered as the Jewish state. While, at the beginning, it was meant to be a safe haven for nationalist Jews or those who were running away from anti-semitism in the West, later on differing opinions on the collective identity of the Israeli society started to be a source of friction (Cohen, 2004). What would "Jewish" mean? How would it be defined? That schism appeared on the definitions of Jewishness and how "Jewish" the State of Israel is, turned into a source of political contention between the secular and the religious Israelis and influenced the political make up of the country. The 1967 War also brought new questions to the table together with the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, inhabited by around 500.000 Palestinians at the time. What to do with these lands that are beyond the internationally recognized borders of Israel and with people who can sharply change the hardly ensured demographic balance between Jews and Arabs? According to the nationalist-religious, line that was a messianic moment as Jews have totally returned to the land envisioned in Torah. That meant the completion of the state and the end of Jewish suffering in a redemptive manner. For left-wingers this should not have been conceived as the Israeli territory and could be returned directly to the inhabitants of the land. Religious-nationalist line has won and the occupied territories have remained under the occupation of Israel. And it was not only occupation but also an ever intensifying tide of settlements has started that would struggle for achieving the control of the land and the demographic superiority over the West Bank. That crave for control over land would lead to the empowerment of hard liner Religious-Zionist camp in the Israeli political landscape.

The year 1977 has marked the end of the political balance that came to exist since the very establishment of the state. It became the year the nationalist Herut Party casted more votes than the Israeli Labour Party that ruled the country since the very beginning. It was the victory of nationalism with racist tones over a patriotic type and that has changed the Israeli political setting ever after. One of the serious developments that paved the ground for the secular-religious friction has been the rise of religious-nationalist Jews who began to settle the occupied territories by seizing the Palestinian properties and involve in violence against civilians in the West Bank. They had plans to blow up the Dome of the Rock mosque to push for an inter-religious war between Jews and Muslims and to finish the Camp David Peace Process. Another attempt from that side to stop the peace process has been the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a religious-nationalist Jew. Around that time religious-nationalist rabbis made proclamations to soldiers regarding "how sinful would be the evacuation of settlements" in the occupied territories. Another development in the recent decades has been Religious-Nationalist Camp's taking positions against the Israeli Supreme Court that can take a binding decision on any matter regarding any Israeli institution and it outlaw various decisions and acts generated by the politicians from the Religious-Nationalist Camp. Demonstrations and life threats against the judges of the court reflect the distrust on the part of many religious Jews for the institution that represents the normative power of the state. These indicators clearly reflect the deep religious-secular rift in Israel.

Considering the fractured structure of the Israeli society, the theory of consociationalism could be used to explain the pre-1977 Israeli political setting,

according to some. Consociationalism basically means the power sharing among elites of different camps in deeply divided societies as they reach an agreement on how to divide power and thus encourage their respective camps to support state institutions (Lijphart, 1969). While this has been the case in Israel until 1977, it broke down in 1977 following the loss of the Labour Party that had been in power since 1949 and provided the basis for a consociational order. Up until then, coalitions were between ideologically opposing elites. However, with the defeat of the Labour Party, right wing Likud came to power and the new coalition was no longer an alliance between two ideologically opposing elites. It was the coalition of parties close to one another. It became the coalition of secular right wing Likud with ultraorthodox parties and National Religious Party and it had been a government of contiguous groups. This has been the moment of rise for the Israeli right.

There were a number of reasons behind the defeat of Labour Party such as alienating from Ultraorthodox and Sephardi sections of the society. Ultra-orthodox leaders charged Labour with the secularization of the Israeli society and this was an unforgivable sin in their eyes. For the Sephardi Jews who faced a certain degree of exclusion in various spheres because of their Middle Eastern background and traditionalism, Labour was responsible with their low status in the Israeli society and the destruction of their traditional structures on their way to absorption into the modern Israeli society. In this moment, Menachem Begin's Likud became an option for Sephardic voters in reaction to the elitist stance of the Labour Party. National Religious Party appeared as a bridge between modernist seculars and traditionalist religious and thus casted a considerable degree of votes from both sides.

What disappointed the Israeli seculars in the process has been the National Religious Party's change from a moderate party in foreign affairs into a hawk. Over time, the party has abandoned its status of bridge between traditionalists and modernists. Religious Zionism came to ally itself more with violent settlers rather a synthesis long deserved by the Israeli seculars. Because of that, the Israeli political landscape became divided along a left-right and a secular-religious axes. Parties with religious leanings came to stand as opposed to parties such as Labor that have secularist-leftist tendencies and that further accelerated the religious-secular tension in the Israeli society.

It was not only shift to right in Israeli politics that made all the change. There were changes in Israeli seculars, too. As Israel was established with high tones of socialism, it has been the sources of values for the Israeli seculars. However, the socialist stance of Israel was not sustainable particularly due to efforts of the political elites to distance Israel from the Soviet Union and to attract investments from outside. That led to a deeper penetration to the European markets and brought with it high tides of Americanization (Rebhun & Waxman, 2000). "The breakdown of socialism as an ideology created a vacuum at both the elite and mass levels that was replaced by post¬ modern individualism and Western liberal democracy" (Freedman, et al., 1999) that furthered the demands of Israeli seculars. "While the religious camp kept its traditional communal and collective value system and even moved further toward communalism and segregation, secular Israeli society abandoned its collective norms and practices." (Freedman, et al., 1999) That brought a further individualisation and secularisation, further rifting apart the religious and the secular camps in the Israeli society.

Seculars Stance against Financing the Ultra-Orthodox Jews

Another important aspect of the religious-secular split in Israel is the secular reactions to the privileges provided by the state to Ultra-Orthodox Jews as they do take place in the army for military service and do not pay taxes. These privileges have been the source of various protests in the recent years and the current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had various attempts to abolish the privileges provided to Ultra-Orthodox.

These privileges have been one of the vicious circles of Israeli politics and their history even precedes the establishment of the state. One of the main aims of the founders of Israel has been to provide the unity at the inception of the state and to this end, David Ben Gurion has sent a letter to ultra-orthodox leaders in 1947. In the letter, Ben Gurion guaranteed all ultra-orthodox population freedom from the military service and freedom to follow their own educational curriculum. In addition to that, they started to have tax deductions. At the time when Ben Gurion wrote that letter, their number was round 400 Jews. Today they are around 900.000 in Israel, and the ultra-orthodox population is expected to be the majority in Israel by 2050 (MacDonald, 2010). That sounds alarming enough for the Israeli seculars but it is not over with that.

The vicious cycle that Ultra-Orthodox creates in the Israeli political system is slightly more different than the demographic one. Ultra-Orthodox Parties have been defined as non-Zionist and sometimes anti-Zionist in terms of their stance regarding the State of Israel. On one hand, they do take place in the Knesset, draft bills and join coalition. On the other hand, they do not have much interest in numerous affairs of the State of Israel but to join coalition and allocate more funding for their ultra-orthodox institutions or that are mostly educational or enact religious laws. In this regard, they make up ideal coalition partners for the Zionist parties for they can be easily persuaded with certain financial and legal privileges such as having tax deductions. Therefore, they can be reliable coalition partners for parties whose voters are secular. In such a fractured environment of Israeli politics, secular parties find themselves in coalition with ultra-orthodox parties most of the time to ensure coalition stability by delivering a payment despite all the reactions from their own secular voters. The most vivid example to that is the recent case of Benjamin Netanyahu. In the midst of a potential trial from bribery and misconduct, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu might opt for early elections in Israel and one of his first moves has been to convene a meeting with ultra-orthodox in the cabinet to reach an agreement on the law draft that will enforce ultra-orthodox men to do military service. Ironically the same draft was brought on the table by himself to appease demands for the ultra-orthodox conscription. In the midst of a crisis, he is working hard to negotiate over an issue crafted by himself and this might bring Netanyahu a big plus in case he ran for early elections.

Coalitions are viewed as signs of a healthy democracy. One can argue that Israeli case is also reflective of that argument, it is seen under the category of an ethnic democracy though (Smooha, 1997). However, the coalition patterns might also be reflective of deeper issues within the societies such as deepening rifts that are hard to bridge. The religious-secular rift in Israel can be seen from that point and it clearly reflects itself in the Israeli coalition politics. The vicious circle created by the existence of ultra-orthodox parties clearly reflects the structural flaws in the Israeli system that were born out of the dividedness of the Israeli society.

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