Democracy Put to the Test in Israel

Lessons from the "Electoral Deadlock"

Gábor Halmai

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The October 27 Knesset election appeared to produce a political deadlock in Israel, as neither the current governing coalition led by Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party nor the parties making up the anti-Netanyahu camp managed to secure the 61 seats required for a parliamentary majority. The former won 53 seats, while the latter secured 48. The Joint List, an alliance bringing together three Arab left-wing parties, and Ra'am, originally an Islamist party which has become more moderate, combining conservative and pragmatic elements, won a total of 19 seats, almost twice their performance in the previous election. The exceptionally high turnout among Arab citizens (approximately 77 percent compared to 53 percent in 2022), and the success of their parties are undoubtedly signs of their determination to become an integral part of the country's political life and of their willingness to cooperate with Jewish parties in pursuit of change.

The opposition Zionist bloc, led by the Yashar party of Gadi Eisenkot, a former IDF chief of staff, was formed specifically with the aim of ousting PM Netanyahu, who is facing legal proceedings over corruption allegations, is held responsible for the security failures of October 7 and has initiated a gradual process of autocratisation. The electoral figures make it clear that the combined 67 seats won by the opposition coalition and the Israeli Arab parties, both of which share the objective of removing the Netanyahu coalition, would make a change of government possible, whether through a majority coalition or a minority government sustained by Palestinian parliamentary support. In other words, the much-desired political change depends on the willingness of these two opposition forces to cooperate.

Since Eisenkot and his allies explicitly identify themselves as Zionists, their readiness to enter into an alliance with Arab parties – the most obvious way out of the electoral deadlock – would also reveal a great deal about Zionism's relationship with non-Jewish political forces and, by extension, about the democratic character of the Jewish State. Two important criteria for assessing the latter are equality of citizenship and the secular nature of the state.

The Limits of the Anti-Netanyahu Camp

Of course, the current Likud-led government also considers itself Zionist. However, its ultra-Orthodox and racist coalition partners reject both principles outright, as well as any form of cooperation with Arab parties. Yet Avigdor Lieberman, leader of Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home), who belongs to the anti-Netanyahu camp, made it equally clear before the election that he would rule out Arab parties not only as coalition partners but also as external supporters of any minority government. According to his reasoning, some Arab Israeli politicians supported South Africa's initiative to condemn Israel for genocide before the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Lieberman subsequently even hinted that he might withdraw from the alliance led by Eisenkot, accusing its members of planning to join forces with Netanyahu.

Even if this particular accusation is unfounded, it remains true that neither Eisenkot nor the centre-right alliance B'Yachad (Together), established by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, has ruled out cooperation with a Likud party without Netanyahu at its helm. In other words, with the sole exception of Yair Golan's Democrats, all members of the opposition coalition have placed the prospect of a purely Zionist government above cooperation with Arab parties. To avoid this, the possibility of direct election of the prime minister, Netanyahu's aborted idea from 2021, was

even raised within the opposition coalition. But an aversion to cooperation is also reflected in the conditions that Eisenkot, after his meeting with Lapid on October 31, set for everyone to join the Zionist coalition. Among them, there is only one – the mandatory military service for all citizens – which is not primarily aimed at the Arab parties, but rather at the ultra-Orthodox supporters of the current governing coalition. The demand to recognise Hamas as a terrorist organisation may already be too much for those Arab parties. While Ra'am's leader Mansour Abbas condemned the October 7 massacre, parts of the Joint List have avoided labelling Hamas a terrorist organisation. The other two, related but not entirely identical conditions, as we will see, also present the Arabs with a choice. While commitment to the values of the Declaration of Independence is more likely, the Jewish, democratic, liberal and egalitarian nature of the State of Israel is much more difficult to accept for Arab parties. Although the Declaration did indeed contain liberal democratic principles referring to citizen equality, in recent decades these have increasingly been pushed into the background by ethnic nationalism.

From the Declaration of Independence to Ethnic Nationalism

Yet, in the view of many, the very fact that the state defines itself as Jewish is incompatible with its democratic character, just as it is incompatible with the liberal conception of Zionism that could still be discerned in the 1948 Declaration of Independence. That vision, however, very quickly turned into a utopia and eventually into a myth.

The Declaration of Independence, which established the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, following Herzl's intentions, affirmed the equal rights of citizens with the formulation: "(The State of Israel)...will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations". The Declaration also addresses the Arab inhabitants of the country in a separate passage:

> *"We appeal —in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months—to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions."*

Thus, even without explicitly using the word *democracy*, the Declaration sets out principles that are fundamentally liberal and democratic in character. It is also significant that the text makes no direct mention of God. Instead, it refers to the "Rock of Israel"—an expression that religious Jews may interpret as referring to God, while secular Israelis can understand it as an invocation of Israel's strength. This choice suggests that the authors also implicitly endorsed the secular character of the state. In order to guarantee these principles and establish the state's permanent institutions, the Declaration stipulated that the Constituent Assembly to be elected should adopt a constitution by October 1, 1948.

That constitution, however, has never materialised. Instead, Israel has adopted a series of Basic Laws. Among them is the 2018 Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, which makes no reference whatsoever to liberal democracy, the principle of equality or the rights of the Arab national minority. Instead, it declares that "the State of Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish People." Its first article stipulates that "the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish People" and that "the right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish People."

The increasingly radical ethnic nationalism pursued by successive Netanyahu governments has, since early 2023, been accompanied by anti-democratic efforts to dismantle the system of checks and balances, above all judicial independence. In response, a nationwide wave of resistance brought hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets and even threatened the survival of the autocratizing government.

This process of democratisation was interrupted by Hamas's massacre of October 7, 2023. Nor did the government's response, in the form of a military offensive in Gaza that violated international law, reverse the development in which not only government representatives but also members of the opposition openly discuss the permanent annexation of the territories occupied after 1967, including Gaza and the West Bank, as Yair Lapid did in February 2026. With the exception of the Democrats led by Yair Golan, this position signals not merely the abandonment of the two-state solution, but also the end of political and social support for an Israel in which two national communities could coexist on the basis of equality.

Cooperation or Ethnonationalism

It is against this background that the Zionist opposition parties and the Arab parties must somehow reach an agreement on removing Netanyahu's autocratic government. The former would have to overcome their reluctance to recognise the equal civil and political rights of Arab citizens of Israel, while the latter would need to confront the dangers inherent in forms of Zionism that reject equality and secularisation. If this agreement fails because of the unwillingness or misjudgment of either side, what will remain is an ethnonationalist Jewish state that can hardly be described as a democracy, governed by a so-called "national unity" government for the Jewish people—either with the corrupt and autocratic Netanyahu at its helm or, in a somewhat better scenario, without him. Unless the Arab parties – as signs have indicated – decide to support a minority coalition of opposition Zionist parties from the outside in order to get rid of the current racist government.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gábor Halmai

Gábor Halmai is Professor Emeritus at Eötvös Loránd University and the European University Institute, Florence, and a visiting professor at LUISS Guido Carli in Rome.

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