The Increasingly Right Stuff: Religious Parties in Israel's Upcoming Election

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Sep 5, 2019
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Brief Analysis

Amidst all the turmoil of Israel's unprecedented second national election within six months, due on September 17, one key yet often overlooked factor stands out: the decisively right-wing role of the small religious parties. Despite the high birth rate of the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox groups, they still get only about one-fifth of the vote, and thus of the seats in the Knesset. But that will probably be enough to prevent the formation of a narrow centrist government under the Kahol Lavan (Blue and White, Israel's national colors) coalition. As a result, the most likely outcomes are either another narrow right-wing government led by the Likud Party, or a broader center-right one with both Likud and Kahol Lavan.

The reason is that the religious parties' mandates are almost always crucial to make up the necessary majority in parliament. The last time Israel had a center-left government—precisely because these Jewish religious parties were willing to join it—was two decades ago, during Ehud Barak's short-lived tenure as prime minister in 1999-2000. After that, the religious parties agreed to join only right-wing governing coalitions. So those are the only kind of governments Israel has had ever since, even when center-left and right were almost tied.

Moreover, this remarkably disproportionate right-wing religious tilt seems well on track to repeat itself in the current election. Depending upon the precise results, Israel's religious parties could conceivably be enticed to join some kind of center-right "national unity" government, or they might even be left out of such an oxymoronic coalition entirely. But their rightward ideological turn will make them loath to join a purely centrist government, even if the right gains no clear path to the required 61-seat Knesset majority.

Moreover, the leading centrist party, as the latest statements by its leaders Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid reiterate, reciprocates in kind, with public disdain for these "sectoral" religious parties. So the one big thing that appears almost certain is this: opposition from these religious parties will continue to prevent the formation of any purely centrist Israeli government. That is why, when asked in an August poll what kind of coalition they expected, a mere 5 percent of the Israeli Jewish public predicted a centrist one, headed by Kahol Lavan.

Jewish religious political parties have always been part of the Israeli political scene. In fact, their roots go back to the pre-state Zionist movement's institutions. Over the years these parties represented two different religious sectors: the ultra-Orthodox (e.g., Agudat Israel Party) and the Orthodox or National Religious (e.g., Ha'Mizrahi, later known by the Hebrew acronym Mafdal, or National Religious Party). Neither of these parties represented or could have represented both sectors at the same time, as the two were deeply divided over the Zionist creed and the question of Israel as a Jewish entity. The ultra-Orthodox sector was anti- or at least non-Zionist and hence saw the state of Israel as a political entity with no Jewish religious value. The national Orthodox sector, however, is deeply committed to the Zionist idea and sees Israel as an entity invested with religious significance.

Furthermore, the ultra-Orthodox saw the establishment of Israel as a negative development in Jewish history. In their belief system, in order

to be redeemed, the Jewish people should wait until the Messiah comes and not take active steps to change their existential situation. The National Religious sector on the other hand considers the state of Israel as the beginning of Jewish national and religious redemption and hence as sacred.

Both kinds of parties, ultra-Orthodox and National Religious, acknowledge the authority of the religious leadership—their respective rabbis. However, while the ultra-Orthodox parties see their authority as standing far above that of the state and its institutions in all walks of life, the National Religious parties see the state institutions as the relevant authority in political matters, and the rabbis as the supreme authority on religious matters. The latter duality is quite problematic when a situation has political and religious aspects at the same time. For example, who is the relevant authority—the political or the religious leader—when a withdrawal from parts of the Greater Land of Israel is discussed, as such a move goes against the promise of God to give the land in its entirety of the Children of Israel (i.e., the Jews).

Zionist or non-Zionist, the Jewish Israeli religious parties have always been small in terms of their electoral appeal. They get their disproportionally strong political influence first and foremost from the need embedded in the structure of the Israeli parliamentary system to build multi-partner coalitions in order to get a large enough majority in the Knesset. One should add to that the drive of almost all Israeli prime ministers, regardless of their party affiliation, to emphasize their commitment to Jewish history and values by having religious parties as part of their coalition-based governments.

In the past, the ultra-Orthodox and the National Religious parties could easily join every coalition, be it led by Labor or Likud (the formerly two dominant parties in Israel). The ultra-Orthodox parties were mainly interested in securing large budgets for their communities, which did not see themselves as participants in Israeli public political discourse. In particular, the ultra-Orthodox communities and leaders had no interest in security and foreign relations, the focal points of Israeli politics. The National Religious parties for their part were much more involved in this discourse, but their rather moderate views on security, the economy, and other issues enabled them in the past to join forces with non-religious political actors of both the left and the right.

However, in recent years things have dramatically changed. Both population sectors and the parties representing them—the ultra-Orthodox parties United Torah Judaism and Shas, and the National Religious parties Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home)—have turned politically to the right. The ultra-Orthodox sector has been deeply politicized, some would even say “Zionified.” As shown below, since the mid-1990s and even more so today, on the grassroots level the members of this sector define themselves in huge numbers as right-wingers.

To an even greater extent, the National Religious sector also massively affiliates itself with the political right. With few exceptions, the latter strongly identifies with the Judea and Samaria (West Bank) settlement project as well as with the settler community. Last but not least, the National Religious sector has undergone a cognitive transition: they no longer see themselves as a parochial political player, but rather as the ideological spearhead of Israeli Jewish society. A common metaphor used by the leaders of this sector is, “We are no longer just riders of the nation’s train, but already occupy the locomotive driver’s seat.”

Table 1 and graphs 1 and 2 reflect this political positioning:

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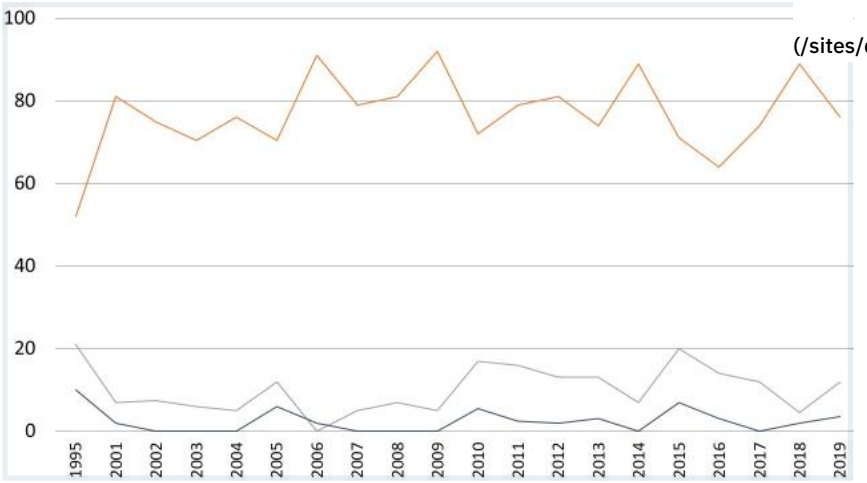
Sector (% of the Israeli Jewish public)	Left	Center-Left	Center	Center-Right	Right
Haredi (11%)	2	4	2	29	60
National Religious (15%)	0	0	11	6	81.5
Traditional religious (15%)	0	5	8.5	14	71
Traditional non-religious (16%)	3	7	17	23	46
Secular (43%)	13	10	26	20	25

*Source: Israeli Voice Survey, May 2019

Graph 1: Ultra-Orthodox political affiliation 1995-2019*



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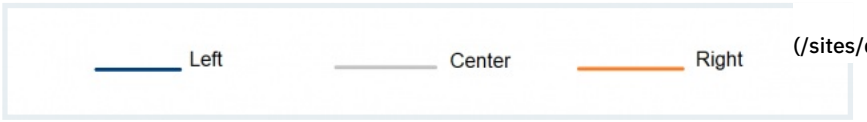

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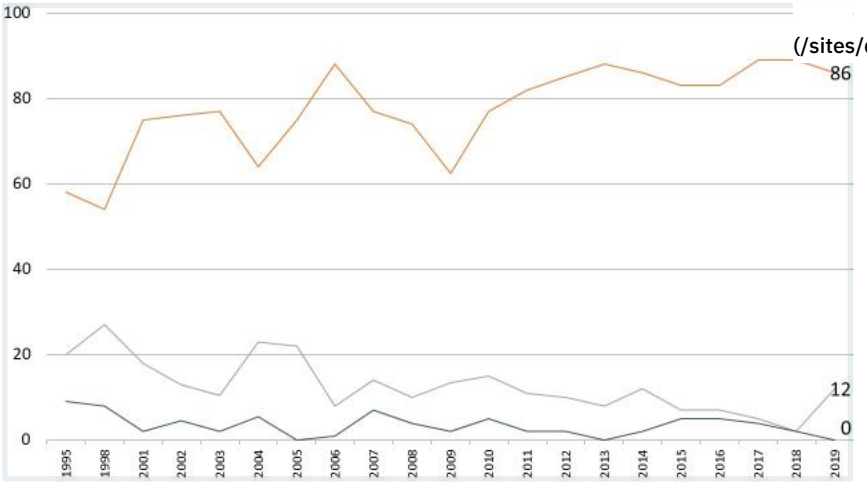
Graph 2: National religious political affiliation 1995-2019



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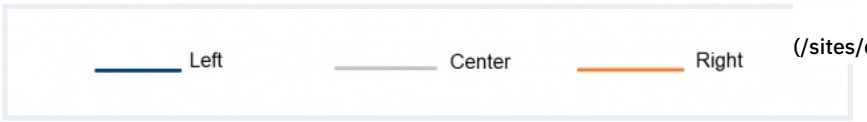

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*Source: Peace Index surveys 1995-2018 & the Israeli Voice survey, May 2019.

This unequivocal political identity makes the religious political parties critical participants in all right-wing coalitions and increases their bargaining position vis-a-vis Likud leaders. On the other hand, unlike in the past, this identity reduces the political field of maneuvering of their own leaders, as they can hardly act in the opposite direction to their voters' political will and hence be considered as realistic participants in a center or center-left coalition.

Furthermore, it works both ways. Binyamin Netanyahu and his right-wing Likud have generally preferred a narrower coalition with the

religious parties over a broader one without them. Rather than question the clout of the religious parties, as many on the left and center do, the Likud and the splinter right-wing parties tend to celebrate and accommodate their desires. And on the other side of the political spectrum, Israel's centrist and left-wing parties have grown increasingly anti-religious.

In the current electoral context, Avigdor Liberman's small center-right faction—the hawkish, Jewish-nationalist, but secular party Yisrael Beitenu (Israel Is Our Home), which polls project may double its seats to 10 and play a key swing role in coalition formation—has explicitly called for an end to Jewish religious exemptions from the military draft. This all but rules out a coalition with the ultra-Orthodox. And Yair Lapid, head of the large Yesh Atid (There Is a Future) faction in the main Kahol Lavan centrist coalition, has long been identified with secularist tendencies in Israeli public life.

If these contenders were willing to consider a coalition with Israel's Arab political parties, projected to earn 10-13 seats in the upcoming vote, they might come closer to a majority even without any Jewish religious parties behind them. But these centrist opposition parties remain unwilling to consider that option. The Arab parties have for the most part returned the disfavor, unwilling to join any Israeli government in the past. They did, however, form a crucial part of the "blocking majority" against Likud that enabled Yitzhak Rabin to assume the prime ministry in 1992. And one of their top leaders today, Ayman Odeh, has just offered to help give the center a new majority after the upcoming election, even from outside a formal governing coalition.

The latest straw polls predict that the religious parties will maintain or even increase their strength. They project around eight seats for the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox party United Torah Judaism; another eight for the Sephardi Orthodox party Shas; and even more seats, perhaps eleven, for the new party aptly named Yamina (Rightward), which inherits many of the hawkish National Religious voters of the former Jewish Home Party, and some others besides. If anything, these polls may underestimate the religious voters, who may be more motivated to vote twice in six months, and who have also been known to shy away from or even deliberately mislead pollsters.

So, if the past is prologue, we may well see Israel's Jewish religious parties once again give the right a decisive advantage in coalition formation. To be sure, Israeli politics has had its share of surprises lately, and Netanyahu's legal troubles add a new layer of uncertainty to this prognosis. A wider coalition of strange bedfellows, possibly without some of the religious parties, cannot be totally ruled out. Nevertheless, a narrow center-left coalition seems almost impossible—if only because of the special role these small religious parties play in the self-proclaimed Jewish state.

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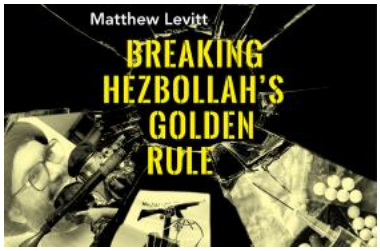

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