

# Can the Change Coalition End Israel's Endless Election Cycle?

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Brief Analysis

**The diverse coalition may be able to form a viable government, but it will need to navigate carefully in light of internal political differences and Netanyahu's presence in the opposition as a potential spoiler.**

On May 5, Israeli president Reuven Rivlin asked [Yesh Atid party leader Yair Lapid](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countdown-israels-election-conversation-yair-lapid>) to form a government after Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu failed to do so over the past month. The move marks the most formidable challenge yet to the incumbent, who has dominated Israeli politics since 2009. Lapid is expected to move quickly on assembling his "Change Coalition," cobbling together a very broad collection of parliamentarians from the right, center, and left. If this effort succeeds, Yamina party chair Naftali Bennett will serve as prime minister for the first half of the government's five-year term, eventually rotating with Lapid, who will serve as foreign minister in the interim. Benny Gantz would stay on as defense minister.

Although the coalition will have more seats from the center and left than the right, it will likely establish a parity system so that no side is able to pass deeply controversial policies. The resultant government's guiding premise will be helping the economy recover while denying Netanyahu another opportunity to seek immunity from his ongoing corruption case. In response, Netanyahu seems determined to orchestrate opposition against the nascent Change Coalition and force Israel into a fifth round of elections, remaining the caretaker leader in the interim.

## Why Couldn't Netanyahu Form a Government?

The prospects of Lapid and Bennett assembling a stable coalition and forming a viable government remain uncertain, but the reasons behind Netanyahu's setbacks over the past four weeks—and four election rounds—are clear at this point. Much like what happened in 1992 and 1999, the Likud Party's apparent undoing is largely

attributable to a failure of leadership on the right. By not fostering a sense of collaborative purpose among his fellow right-wing politicians, Netanyahu created too many internal enemies.

Most notably, four of the top officials expected to join the Change Coalition formerly served as Netanyahu's closest aides—Bennett, Gideon Saar, Zeev Elkin, and Avigdor Liberman—so why did all of them focus their campaigns on bringing him down? One key moment was Netanyahu's decision to renege on his rotation agreement with Gantz last year, which fostered deep distrust toward his other promises and hampered his ability to govern. Moreover, Saar and Elkin feared that he would continue denigrating Israel's judicial and law enforcement institutions in order to delegitimize his court case. Former justice minister and ardent right-winger Ayelet Shaked went so far as to assail Netanyahu's "lust for power" in a recently leaked tape, describing the prime minister and his wife as "dictators." Such tensions no doubt influenced right-wing voters in the March 23 election, where Likud lost over 20 percent of its tally compared to previous rounds.

Netanyahu's miscalculations continued during and after the election. His campaign had focused on helping a small, far-right party pass the threshold for entry into parliament so that no right-wing votes would be "lost." Yet the Religious Zionism faction, led by Bezael Smotrich, turned on him after passing the threshold, denying the prime minister's request to use the United Arab List (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-kingmakers-stand-center-israels-coalition-drama>) (led by Mansour Abbas) as a safety net against parliamentary no-confidence votes. When Netanyahu pressed Bennett to join his coalition, the Yamina leader told him that he first needed to secure a Smotrich-Abbas understanding in order to guarantee a parliamentary majority of sixty-one seats. Netanyahu tried to outmaneuver the Religious Zionists by appealing to sympathetic rabbis, but most of them took Smotrich's side. Similarly, his assumption that Bennett would cave to right-wing pressure and declare fealty to him proved wrong, and his promises of a short rotating premiership (reportedly without authority over the security services or relations with Washington and Moscow) were too little too late.

One move that might have made a difference for Netanyahu is allowing a Likud figurehead to serve as prime minister in his place. In addition to demonstrating his commitment to the party over his personal interests, this could have enabled him to continue controlling most government decisionmaking behind the scenes while seeking immunity from prosecution. Yet this approach would also launch a succession struggle within the Likud, and Netanyahu is clearly not ready to consider a post-Netanyahu era—indeed, he is expected to announce shortly that he will stay on as party leader.

Many will salute the long-term societal impact of one Netanyahu decision—partially opening the door to the United Arab List—but this move came at a short-term political cost. In doing so, he may have inadvertently helped Lapid and Bennett legitimize Arab parties as more integral to Israel's political system, thus boosting the coalition arraying against him.

## Can the Change Coalition Succeed?

**T**he weaknesses of Lapid and Bennett's potential government are obvious. As a political hybrid with fundamental differences over issues such as Palestinian rights and judicial activism, the Change Coalition will be vulnerable to fracturing over various domestic and regional developments, particularly in times of crisis. One of Bennett's seven Knesset members has already announced that he will not join the coalition, so the leadership will need to bring on even more Arab members to ensure sufficient parliamentary support. This is why the threat of opposition from Netanyahu cannot be discounted, since he will no doubt try to pick off additional defectors and exacerbate wedge issues in order to break the coalition.

A Lapid-Bennett government would also have several strengths, however. First, the presence of Netanyahu in the opposition could energize coalition members, since he is the glue that brought them together. Yet they will still need

to demonstrate competent governance if they hope to jettison his narrative that he is indispensable to Israel.

Second, Lapid and Bennett appear to trust each other, at least for now. When they worked together in Netanyahu's government of 2013-2015, they both sought to curb the power of the ultraorthodox, and both felt victimized by the prime minister's decision to bring that government down for his own purposes.

Third, now that right-wing figures Bennett and Saar have [crossed the political Rubicon](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-leadership-israel-conversation-gideon-saar) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-leadership-israel-conversation-gideon-saar>), they likely realize they may not be able to cross back. That is, if they fail to produce results and the Change government folds, they could face angry right-wing voters in a fifth election. Like other coalition members, they are therefore keen on sticking to consensus issues such as facilitating the post-pandemic economic recovery, making infrastructure improvements, and adopting a budget for the first time since 2018.

Fourth, the coalition will likely be bolstered by growing public revulsion over the fact that certain ultraorthodox elements have been able to flaunt health restrictions during the pandemic. This sentiment reached a fever pitch after state authorities were barred from supervising a mass religious festival at Mount Meron last week, which ended in tragedy when forty-five participants were killed. The prospect of ultraorthodox parties being shut out of the next government may signal community members that they can no longer reject the rules.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

**D**espite its wariness about wading into the treacherous waters of Israeli politics, the Biden administration would privately welcome a more ideologically diverse leadership after six years of purely right-wing governments, particularly given the Change Coalition's commitment to judiciary independence. Similarly, reduced ultraorthodox influence would be welcomed by the largely non-orthodox American Jewish community, which tends to vote Democrat in large numbers.

Yet Washington has no illusions about the prospective policy views of a government headed by Bennett. The Palestinian issue in particular could break his coalition, so any progress on that front [will need to be modest](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-bridges-peace-us-policy-toward-arab-states-palestinians-and-israel) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/building-bridges-peace-us-policy-toward-arab-states-palestinians-and-israel>) at best. For example, Bennett is highly unlikely to support granting the Palestinian Authority jurisdiction over any part of Area C, the portion of the West Bank that lies outside Palestinian urban areas and surrounding environs.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) could complicate U.S. relations as well. According to polls, many Israelis remain skeptical about the terms of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, so U.S. efforts to return to those terms are bound to create friction. Netanyahu has always projected implacable opposition to the JCPOA, and although he has been [decidedly less confrontational](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/bibi-natanzyahu-plays-bad-cop-iran) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/bibi-natanzyahu-plays-bad-cop-iran>) on this issue during the Biden administration, his posture may change if he is no longer prime minister. The Change Coalition is bound to look at the deal's renewal through the same skeptical lens and convey those views to Washington, especially if negotiators do not commit to pursuing follow-on agreements that [address the JCPOA's gaps](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-braces-us-revival-jcpoa) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-braces-us-revival-jcpoa>). The coalition may not resort to the same confrontational tactics that Netanyahu used in 2015, but members are likely united in their desire to preserve Israel's options for independent action [if circumstances warrant it](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-nuclear-breakout-what-it-and-how-calculate-it) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-nuclear-breakout-what-it-and-how-calculate-it>).

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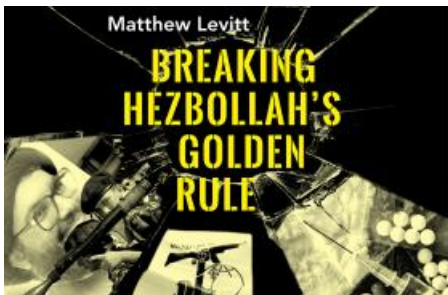
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