

Israel's National Unity Governments: A Retrospective

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Brief Analysis

Friday, June 15 marks day one hundred for the Sharon administration and Israel's sixth national unity government. The occasion warrants a look back at the five previous Israeli unity governments.

Israel's First National Unity Government (1967-1969)

Between 1949 and 1967, Israel witnessed thirteen separate governmental rotations, each coalition surviving for an average of seventeen months. On the day before the outbreak of the June 1967 war, prime minister Levi Eshkol -- under mounting public pressure to do so -- brought opposition parties Herut (the predecessor of the present Likud Party), Gahal, and Rafi into the ruling coalition, the first time any of these parties had been included in a government. This national unity government, the first of its kind in Israel's history, was formed even though Eshkol's ruling coalition had included 75 seats out of the 120 in Knesset (well above the necessary threshold). In the 111-member national unity government, the former opposition parties were given just one seat in the cabinet -- the Ministry of Defense, awarded to Moshe Dayan. The newly enlarged cabinet decided to launch a preemptive strike against Egypt, and only after the start of the attack did Eshkol inform the Knesset of the change in government, which required its approval. Given the exuberance over Israel's performance in the war, permission was subsequently granted with relatively little debate, and in this form the unity government remained for thirty-eight months -- a marathon term compared to preceding governments -- until Eshkol passed away on February 26, 1969.

Israel's Second and Third National Unity Governments (1969-1970)

Following Eshkol's death in February 1969, Golda Meir was tapped to succeed him as head of the Labor Party and to lead Israel's fourteenth government. Wary of upcoming elections, coalition members Alignment (Labor), Gahal, Herut, National Religious Party (NRP), Independent Liberals, and Rafi together with the minority lists decided to honor the existing coalition agreement and maintain the embrace of national unity. This time, however, former opposition parties Gahal, Herut, and Rafi were given ministerial posts and portfolios as fully integrated members until Israel went to the polls in October 1969. Following the elections, a new national unity government was formed with essentially the same composition. Paramount for this government was addressing the War of Attrition with Egypt, a protracted seventeen-month-long conflict between Israel and Egypt along the Suez Canal punctuated by incidents of Israeli raids and deep air strikes. As hostilities escalated -- raising the specter of a superpower confrontation -- U.S. secretary of state William Rogers floated an Israeli-Arab peace initiative on June 19, 1970, the "Rogers Plan," outlining the establishment of a negotiating channel and calling for the acceptance of UN Resolution 242 in addition to a ninety-day ceasefire. Despite fierce internal opposition from right-wing elements within the government, Israel accepted the initiative on August 4. In so doing, Israel also accepted the principle of territorial withdrawal and hastened the break-up of an already tenuous coalition. Herut Party leader Menachem Begin, accompanied by his twenty-six members of Knesset (MKs), withdrew from the coalition scarcely a week later. Golda Meir continued to head the government with a reduced majority of 85.

Israel's Fourth National Unity Government (1984-1988)

The July 1984 national elections -- reflecting the fissures in Israeli society that followed the Lebanon war -- were ideologically indecisive: Alignment (Labor) won 44 seats while Likud took 41. Unable to assemble a coalition larger than 54 seats each, the Knesset's two largest parties reached an unprecedented agreement whereby Labor Party leader Shimon Peres and Likud Party leader Yitzhak Shamir would divide the administration and switch portfolios, each serving out two years as prime minister and foreign minister respectively (under this arrangement, Peres served initially as prime minister and Shamir as foreign minister). Still, more unique to this agreement was the creation of a ten-seat inner cabinet divided equally between Labor and Likud to ensure that each party could block, if necessary, the initiative of the other. In September 1984, the new government assumed office with 97 MKs. This government addressed such important issues as withdrawing Israeli troops from most of southern Lebanon to a narrow "security zone" along the border and taming an economic crisis that included 500 percent annual inflation. Although both Labor and Likud parties found themselves at loggerheads over many issues on the foreign policy agenda, the national unity government completed its full four-year term.

Israel's Fifth National Unity Government (1988-1990)

The November 1988 elections resulted once again in a political deadlock. Labor won 39 seats -- down 5 from the previous seventh Knesset and down 24 from the sixth Knesset -- but the 40-seat-strong Likud held just one fewer seat than in the previous Knesset. Labor and Likud blocs both made abortive attempts to construct coalitions with the religious parties (Shas, NRP, Degel Hatorah, and Tehiya) who collectively held 18 seats, almost enough to give either bloc the required majority. In the end, Labor and Likud instead chose to adopt another power-sharing arrangement, but unlike the 1984 elections, the poll results enabled Shamir to become prime minister with Peres as foreign minister.

In May 1989, the Shamir government presented plans to proceed with negotiations concerning Palestinian autonomy, and the fabric of the coalition began to unravel. Labor Party leader Peres -- upset that Shamir would not comply with U.S. secretary of state James Baker's more ambitious peace initiative -- toppled the government with the support of religious parties disgruntled by domestic and finance issues. On March 15, 1990, they together executed the first --and to date, only successful -- no-confidence motion against a national unity government, a maneuver later named by Peres rival Yitzhak Rabin "the stinking trick." President Chaim Herzog nominated Peres to succeed Shamir, but Peres failed to form a narrow Labor-religious coalition. Instead, Shamir received the nod from Herzog and swiftly assembled his own government comprising Likud, Party for Advancing the Zionist Idea, and the religious parties (NRP, Shas, Agudat Yisrael, and Degel Hatorah). On June 11, 1990, a narrow majority of 62 Knesset members approved of the new Shamir government, which tumultuously weathered Desert Storm and disputes relating to the convening of the Madrid Peace Conference, lasting two years until the required elections in 1992.

Lessons for 2001.

The historical record is mixed. Although the second and fifth national unity governments were torn asunder over issues on the foreign policy agenda -- particularly peace initiatives -- the first and fourth unity governments successfully overcame similar challenges. Each power-sharing agreement was unique, and some were certainly more brittle than others; the 1984 arrangement served fifty-one months in office, one of the longest terms in Israel's history, whereas the two unity governments under Golda Meir lasted fewer than seventeen months between them. Moreover, some unity governments were assembled in response to external crisis and public consensus for unity, and some were birthed out of parliamentary deadlock and in the interests of political expediency, a variance that makes trends difficult to discern.

It remains to be seen whether the current unity government will follow in the footsteps of Eshkol's wall-to-wall

coalition and complete its term, or return to the period of reciprocal backstabbing and succession typical of the twelfth Knesset. In the short term, national unity governments have demonstrated their utility as a crisis-management tool; in the long term, the need for unity governments is often reduced by the very solutions they engineer.

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