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Netanyahu Calls for New Elections

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The lack of a clear challenger is just one of the many reasons why a confident Netanyahu is calling for early elections.

Citing his inability to pass what he called a “responsible budget” in the Knesset, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu announced Tuesday that he is calling for early elections. The country was not slated to go to the polls until next October, but Netanyahu urged that elections be held as soon as possible. It was announced today by the prime minister’s office that the elections will be held on January 22.

RATIONALE FOR EARLY ELECTIONS

In the most immediate sense, Netanyahu’s announcement was driven by his inability to ensure that his ultraorthodox coalition partners, the Shas Party and United Torah Judaism, would support a budget that included approximately \$4 billion in cuts. Members of these parties have the highest birthrate in Israel and therefore reject the centerpiece of the proposed cuts -- major decreases in child allowances.

In a broader sense, Israeli governments often fall over fiscal issues. Failure to pass a budget traditionally enables smaller parties to position themselves advantageously among voters in the lead-up to an election year. And according to Israeli law, a government must step down if it cannot pass a budget three months into a new calendar year; if the stalemate continued, it was only a matter of time before early elections were called.

Nevertheless, it behooves Netanyahu to say that the decision was imposed on him, as Israelis view snap elections with suspicion. In particular, when an incumbent with high poll ratings makes such a move, voters tend to regard it as too calculating and may even seek to stymie it.

Netanyahu does in fact see early elections as politically beneficial. If the budget were the only issue at hand, he may well have compromised, just as he did in raising taxes over the past year. The current coalition has been one of the least fractious in Israeli history, as the opposition had no chance to bring down the government on its own. And if the ease of enacting budgets is a reliable indicator of coalition compliance, Netanyahu was the first Israeli leader to ever pass a two-year budget.

Fiscal issues aside, then, Netanyahu seeks early elections for a variety of reasons. First, the concern that Israel would unilaterally attack Iran before November has very much abated. Netanyahu’s main ally, Defense Minister Ehud Barak, apparently had second thoughts, believing a strike could be politically costly to Israel if done in defiance of Washington on the eve of U.S. elections. Netanyahu’s recent UN speech suggests that the issue has been deferred for another six to nine months. If the prospect of a pre-November strike was what kept early elections at bay, he can now seek to define the agenda for the upcoming campaign season, highlighting the centrality of the Iran issue while some other parties focus on socioeconomic issues.

Second, Netanyahu seems to believe that time may not be on his side, and that it is better to lock in his strong electoral position early rather than take risks down the road. Considering the likelihood that Israel’s largest trading partner, Europe, will slide into recession in the coming year, the Israeli economy will begin to feel some measure of pain as well. Therefore, late-2013 elections would not be to Netanyahu’s advantage. Moreover, the potential ramifications of the U.S. elections remain uncertain. Netanyahu’s advisors are concerned that a second-term Obama could be more confrontational with him -- a political risk given that Israelis expect their leaders to find the right balance in dealing with Washington, avoiding the extremes of utter compliance and utter defiance and managing relations in a productive manner. Early elections maximize Netanyahu’s chances to gain ground in the polls while minimizing the prospect of policy bruises with the United States.

Third, Netanyahu clearly likes the idea that early elections make it more difficult for his challengers to organize. The political map looks different today than it did when he ran in early 2009. At the time, the rival Kadima Party was the incumbent and had edged out his Likud Party by a 28-27 margin in the 120-seat Knesset; only after intensive coalition-building efforts was he able to garner the 61 seats required to govern. Today, however, Kadima has split, and Netanyahu is viewed as the overwhelming favorite. According to a poll by Haaretz, if elections were held today, Netanyahu’s current coalition would maintain its wide parliamentary lead by a 68-52 margin.

Kadima’s decline can be attributed to the difficulty of maintaining party unity: the opposition has no cabinet

portfolios to allocate in order to ensure party support; it lacks charismatic leadership; and its signature issue, the Palestinian peace process, is increasingly marginalized. Kadima now polls in the single digits, and its key figures and supporters are fragmented. Its current leader -- former chief of staff Shaul Mofaz -- has called for extending the military draft to ultraorthodox Jews, an issue that broke a very short-lived 94-member coalition with Netanyahu this summer. And its previous leader, former foreign minister Tzipi Livni, may start her own party dedicated to reviving the peace process. Another key figure, columnist Yair Lapid, has announced a new party focusing on education and the middle class.

Meanwhile, some of Kadima's voters seem to have moved to the Labor Party, whose leader -- talk-show host Shelly Yechimovich -- focuses on income equality and the high costs besetting Israeli singles and young families. Support for the party began to grow following the summer 2011 social protest movement, which brought hundreds of thousands of Israelis to the streets.

According to pundits, the only figure in Israel who could galvanize strong, unified opposition to Netanyahu is his predecessor, Ehud Olmert, who is considering a political comeback. Netanyahu seems to believe that early elections sharply reduce the prospects of such a comeback. Although Olmert was acquitted on two accusations of corruption this summer, he was convicted on the lesser charge of "breach of trust," and one remaining allegation is expected to be decided in the coming months. Whatever the outcome, Yechimovich has already announced that Labor would not merge under Olmert.

DEVELOPMENTS TO FOLLOW

As the new Israeli political season opens, a number of developments bear watching:

First, to what extent will Netanyahu signal that he wants a government with a wider base than the ultraorthodox and Russian immigrant parties? Such a coalition would have to include a significant number of his opponents in order to deal with the many challenges Israel faces in a convulsive Middle East. Will he tell his Likud constituents that he wants a mandate for this broad-based government?

Second, what sort of parliamentary slate will emerge from the Likud primary? Netanyahu often cites his 2009 speech calling for a two-state solution with the Palestinians, but it is uncertain how many Likud candidates who favor that vision will prevail -- some reports indicate that political moderates could be pushed aside during primary voting.

Third, will Barak's Independence Party gain momentum, or will it be politically vaporized as some predict? Barak is the chief architect behind the concept of attacking Iran, and although he no longer leads the Labor Party, he believes that even a diminished political base will give him some claim on the coveted defense portfolio after early elections. Failing that, Netanyahu would have more difficulty reappointing him to his current post.

Fourth, will the ultraorthodox Shas -- the key to Netanyahu's base since the mid-1990s -- split? Such a development would be predicated on the idea that it is wrong for the ultraorthodox movement to put all its eggs in the same configuration of the current Netanyahu government.

Fifth, how will the agenda for the next election be defined? If Iran becomes the main issue, Netanyahu will have a better chance of claiming a major victory, but if socioeconomic issues come to the fore, they will work to his detriment. It is unclear whether the often-overlooked issue of regional upheaval will affect the race. Netanyahu likely views the recent rise of Islamists in various countries as a sign that his deep-seated suspicion of Arab commitment to peace is warranted, and that Israel must remain cautious. In addition, he will probably cite these regional developments in a bid to personalize the election, saying there is no substitute for experience in navigating the tricky shoals of the Middle East. Yet his opponents will charge that Israel has lost the initiative on the Palestinian issue under his watch, and that the country's regional standing will deteriorate further if he is reelected.

Finally, how will the outcome of the U.S. elections affect Israeli balloting? Netanyahu would likely view a Mitt Romney victory as a boon in wooing back Likud voters who now support Kadima -- such a development could take the sting out of the charge that he is responsible for worsening relations with Washington, making it easier for such voters to return. In contrast, an Obama victory could cut both ways, spurring some voters to avoid Netanyahu to forestall friction and others to bank on the possibility that Netanyahu would respond likewise if Washington chooses a more confrontational course.

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