

Agents of change and a new chapter in Israel's politics

After the Netanyahu years, Israel, a divided society, is now looking forward to some domestic stability



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Benjamin Netanyahu is out and Israel has got a government without him after 12 years. The new government has cobbled together a very unexpected coalition of eight political parties led by Naftali Bennett (picture) who is head of the smallest segment of the coalition. With only six seats of his far-right party, Yamina, Mr. Bennett has surprised all by preventing two things – Netanyahu's hold on power and the fifth national election that most Israelis feared coming their way.

It is Yair Lapid, Israel's new Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister-in-waiting, who is the key architect of the coalition. Mr. Bennett acknowledged him in his first speech in the Knesset (<https://bit.ly/3wmqVcG>) by saying that Mr. Lapid "showed national responsibility, political generosity, and without whom we would not be here today". Under the coalition deal, Mr. Bennett will be the Prime Minister for the first two years, followed by Mr. Lapid for the remaining two. While there are not many who predict that this coalition will last that long, the ve-

ry strange union is still a welcome change in Israeli politics after the four national elections in less than two years. The eight parties do not have any ideological coherence but the single agenda to keep Mr. Netanyahu out of power, in the short run, and to uphold the democratic system based on consensus building, in the long run.

Diverse team

What makes this coalition unique as much as fragile is the fact they fight each other on the most essential matters of politics. Yet, the fight against Mr. Netanyahu has given the Israeli people the most representative government: the coalition has three right-wing parties, two centrist parties, two left-wing parties and one Arab party. Women leaders have done well too, comprising nine Ministers out of the total of 27 Ministers. It is remarkable from the gender point of view as Israel, like most other nation-states, is male-dominated. There is no religious party in the coalition, but Mr. Bennett is a religious individual unlike Mr. Netanyahu; he is also the first kippa (skull cap) wearing Prime Minister of Israel.

The political stalemate is over for the time being, and Mr. Netanyahu is not the 'King Bibi' of Israel after all. He has been outdone by the far-right political leaders who were once his loyal aides; they include Mr. Bennett, Mr. La-



pid and Avigdor Lieberman. What makes the new government unprecedented is the fact that the far-right, in order to fight its mentor Mr. Netanyahu, walked up to the left parties as well as an Arab-Islamist party of Mansour Abbas.

While Israel is a strong and militarily capable state, it is also deeply divided as a society, with too many fundamental frictions among its Jewish population. Therefore, diverse and different ideological groups in this government can help in enabling political stability and inner-social-cohesion. The role of one Arab party in the government is much needed assurance for the otherwise marginalised and stigmatised Israeli Arabs minority.

The challenge ahead is to satisfy each party's core ideological interests but not at the cost of the other so that the fickle unity can last. It demands compromise, reconciliation and acceptance of the other.

Anti-Netanyahu sentiment is pivotal thus far and this will be the glue but a constructive and long-lasting common minimum programme is what the Israeli democracy is striving for after a battered past.

Change of leadership

Mr. Bennett was born and raised by American immigrant parents who moved to Israel from the United States after the 1967 war. He is a former commando of the army's most prestigious commando unit, Sayeret Matkal, the one that Netanyahu used to boast about himself. Mr. Bennett made his way to active politics in the aftermath of the Lebanon war in 2006. Though religious, he is not ultra-orthodox. He is a self-made millionaire who had a greatly successful high-tech career. In short, he is a poster boy for a Start-Up Nation.

As a free-spirited entrepreneur, he has an astonishing ability to take risks and can be called a politically audacious leader. He was Mr. Netanyahu's loyal man for long and served under him as Defence and Education Ministers, and in those years, he demonstrated his far-right inclinations without any qualms such as advocacy for settlements, annexation of major parts of West Bank, Jewish religion and its major role in Israeli society and politics. However, while he struggled to come out of the shadow of Mr. Netanyahu, he transformed himself as flexible and ne-

gotable politician which was clear when he delivered his first speech and said, "Twice in history, we have lost our national home precisely because the leaders of the generation were not able to sit with one and another and compromise. Each was right, yet with all their being right, they burnt the house down on top of us. I am proud of the ability to sit together with people with very different views than mine." It is going to be intriguing how he conducts himself with the others in the coalition and revisits some of his core ideological beliefs and assumptions.

The world watches

Israeli foreign policy is Prime Minister-driven, so the world awaits to see how the new leader will be outside Israel. He has not given many hints about his foreign policy agenda except that he will work to cement Israel's special relationship with the United States, and that he is also well-prepared to deal with Iran firmly and aggressively like his mentor, Mr. Netanyahu. As far as Hamas is concerned, he is likely to leave that to the Defence Minister as he thinks it is a security issue and not a political question.

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