



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Will we meet the new Netanyahu?



Benjamin Netanyahu has started his sixth term as Israel's prime minister, making him its longest-serving prime minister. Although he is an old hand in both Israeli and international politics, will Bibi's sixth term actually be something we have seen so far, or will we have a completely new Netanyahu?

The initial reactions of the US and the EU have been mostly restrained. They will judge the new Israeli government according to its results, and not according to personal criteria. This does not mean that the West is not familiar with the Israeli Prime Minister. They have had a long-standing acquaintance, but have said clearly that they want to see how he behaves in a completely new environment when he takes over the mandate of Prime Minister.

This is Netanyahu's first government where he and his Likud party will be the most moderate. He is surrounded by far-right and ultra-orthodox partners, primarily Itamar Ben-Gvir and his Jewish Power party, as well as Bezalel Smotrich's Religious Zionist Party. Their participation in the government, where Ben-Gvir will lead the Ministry of Public Security with increased powers, and Smotrich Ministry of Finance, will undoubtedly colour Netanyahu's new cabinet with a harsher policy towards the Palestinians, which would be effectively implemented.

Israel is moving towards populism

This kind of composition will lead the new Israeli government into pronounced populism, because the new partners seek a much larger space in society for so-called traditional values, at the expense of liberal society values. Balance, which is very important for the stability of Israeli society, has so far been maintained by all previous governments, including Netanyahu's. His right-wing policies have always had a counter-balance from the parties of the left.

Now, there is no such balance in the

government, and the pendulum is swinging towards orthodox values and away from liberal ones. The ultra-orthodox part of Netanyahu's government advocates, amongst other things, the exemption of religious persons who study Jewish laws in religious institutions from military service, and then a drastic increase in state funding for religious institutions. Its segregationist attitude towards the LGBT population has also been emphasised, so it is possible that these attitudes will also be reflected in its laws. Although not defined by the coalition agreement, the ultra-orthodox groups in Netanyahu's government demand tightening the policy of return to Israel, that is, the criteria that everyone must meet in order to be considered Jewish. American Jews, who are mostly non-Orthodox, might be particularly affected by these possible new solutions.

The New York-based Union for Reform Judaism, which represents the largest religious denomination of American Jews, called the proposed changes "a serious violation of the sacred bond the State of Israel has established with Jews around the world." The biggest expectations of the pragmatic Netanyahu from his new partners is a change in the attitude towards the judiciary, which would possibly lead to the resolution of the court proceedings for corruption he has endured since 2019.

These accusations drove away Bibi's former partners from the centre and left, and brought him closer to the orthodox right-wing, which stands for removing the offence of fraud and breach of trust, for which Netanyahu is on trial, from the criminal code, stripping the High Court of Justice of its ability to strike down unconstitutional laws and granting parliamentarians control over judge selection. If the new government moves in this direction, it will clash with the authority of the Supreme Court regarding the protection of human and minority rights, which according to legal scholar Alan Dershowitz would be "a serious, serious mistake", because Israel's highest court is "respected all over the world, for its objectivity and its neutrality".

A new policy regarding Ukraine?

Benjamin Netanyahu will therefore have to juggle many more balls than in previous prime ministerial terms, as he will have the difficult task of reconciling the shift of domestic politics towards right-wing populism, and possibly towards the reduction of some freedoms in his most important foreign policy priorities.

Needless to say, relations with the US remain top priority. US President Biden said he was looking forward to working with Netanyahu, but warned that Washington would oppose policies that undermine a two-state solution or “contradict our mutual interests and values”. In addition to Middle East issues, in the new US-Israeli balance, a very significant topic will be the attitude of Netanyahu's government towards the war in Ukraine.

Although congratulations for his new prime ministerial mandate came from Vladimir Putin, Netanyahu has a chance to provide more decisive support to Ukraine. Kyiv has criticised Israel for its reticence to help Ukraine's defence more strongly, but Netanyahu is opening up space to make that support more decisive. He would thus harmonise Israel's policy with one of the most important priorities of the US and the West, which would give him the opportunity to expect concessions in some other areas, which might be more important for his new government, and particularly for his new political friends.