



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Israel: First, get rid of Netanyahu



The upcoming **elections in Israel** will, contrary to what is being bandied about, not be the most consequential in that country's history.

The short- to medium-term trajectory of the country has largely been determined by Benjamin Netanyahu's long history of election wins, starting in 1996 after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians.

Israelis should by now be sick and tired of him; at the very least they should be curious if someone else would do better – the bar is not very high.

Netanyahu has been in power almost continuously since 2009, presiding over a steady worsening of Israel's democratic and press and academic freedom indices, as well as a serious erosion in relations with the Palestinians, culminating in the horrendous onslaught on Gaza from October 2023 onward.

Among the domestic lows in that period are laws targeting the foreign funding of NGOs, the Jewish nation-state law that, among other things, demoted the status of Arabic as an official language, and the recent death penalty law that in practice is expected to target Palestinians.

From The Hague to a domestic corruption trial

He should be awaiting trial in a jail cell in The Hague for his conduct of the war on Gaza, rather than trying to extend his ruinous run in power.

Not that the **International Criminal Court** is the only judicial authority seeking to prosecute him. In his own country, he's been accused of using his position as the head of government to drag out a **corruption trial** that could also see him behind bars.

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He should also be facing, at the very least, a commission of inquiry into the massive security failure of 7 October 2023, when Hamas was able to carry out its horrific attack from Gaza.

In contrast to George W. Bush, who had been US president for less than a year when 9/11 happened, Netanyahu shaped much of the political, security and diplomatic environment for almost a decade and a half prior to the attack, with only brief interruptions.

While part of the current election debate focuses on Netanyahu's culpability, among other things, for ignoring warnings and neglecting the Palestinian issue, very little of that is ultimately introspective.

A desperate attempt to cling to power

The leader of the **Israeli Arab Balad party**, Sami Abu Shehadeh, was more or less coerced into withdrawing from the elections by Israel's Supreme Court, over an article published immediately after the Hamas attack in which he had called it an 'important historical event', without explicitly condemning the bloodshed.

This stands in stark contrast to election commission challenges against the participation of two far-right Jewish politicians, current ministers and coalition partners Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, being thrown out.

It is thanks to Netanyahu that these two extremist politicians and their far-right parties have participated in government since 2022.

Just a few decades ago, politicians with Jewish supremacist agendas similar to theirs were

barred from running, such as Meir Kahane, one of their great exemplars.

His deal with the far right was widely seen as a desperate attempt to cling to power in order to escape conviction in his corruption case

Netanyahu had been a highly partisan, decidedly right-wing and nationalist prime minister until then, but was also regarded as cautious and unwilling to rock the boat too much.

His deal with the far right was widely seen as a desperate attempt to cling to power in order to escape conviction in his corruption case.

It was accompanied by an unprecedented assault on the country's judiciary in the guise of 'judicial reform' to strengthen political dominance over the legal system.

There is some merit to Netanyahu's defence that his coalition deal with the far right mirrored an overall shift in Israel's political centre of gravity to the right.

But if so, he should be seen as the midwife of that shift, exacerbating its intolerant and anti-democratic excesses.

The concept of a Jewish democratic state

It can be argued that every country gets the leaders it deserves, that Netanyahu's long reign reflects the actual will of the population and more fundamentally, the long-term character of the Jewish state.

The latter is overall the position underpinning the most deep-seated criticism of Israel: the concept of a Jewish democratic state is basically flawed, Jewish supremacy is the default position, and there's not much difference between Netanyahu and the so-called Zionist opposition.

But it bears repeating that criticism of Israel, and certainly of Netanyahu, is not the same as rejecting the legitimacy of the country, especially now that the two are once more becoming conflated, as can be seen from the stance of the **Green Party** of England and Wales.

For people on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza even a small change could have a huge impact on their lives

Apart from anything else, such wholesale delegitimising serves to increase Israeli society's siege mentality and drives the electorate even further to the right.

Even some Palestinian analysts disagree with the notion that there would be absolutely no difference between another Netanyahu government and one headed by the opposition.

As one put it recently, for people on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza even a small change could have a huge impact on their lives.

A slightly more permissive aid regime in Gaza, for example, or even some timid steps to rein in settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, could make a difference.

The analyst then went on to doubt whether an opposition government would actually be able to implement even modest change, but at least the possibility would exist.

The shrinking space on the left

The shrinking space on the left and the erosion of the peace camp have many contributing factors. The phenomenon is not exclusively Israeli; the last time **Palestinians** went to the polls, in 2006, they elected Hamas. But if polls are correct, support for the movement has declined again.

In any case, Israel, despite facing the dangers of asymmetric warfare and its horrors, is overwhelmingly the stronger party, has an established state structure, a strong economy and should both bear more responsibility as well as take greater risks to de-escalate the situation and respect human rights.

This has been made more difficult by the Hamas attack on 7 October and the subsequent war on Gaza.



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The room for diverging from the strongly anti-Palestinian political mainstream has shrunk even further, actively encouraged and manipulated by Netanyahu and his allies.

Campaign topics are in part very narrowly focused on the operational and technical aspects of Israel's current series of military imbroglios.

Domestic issues deal mostly with Netanyahu's corruption case, judicial reform and drafting ultra-Orthodox Jewish men.

Much of the discussion centres on electoral maths rather than on fundamental, **existential issues** – the consensus seems to be that there is no solution anyway.

The level of ethno-nationalism in the campaign appears higher than ever before. Almost every Jewish, Zionist party, except the Democrats, rejects forming a coalition with an **Arab party** representing Israel's Palestinian citizens.

Doing so would open them up to charges of selling out the state to its enemies.

A besieged nation

The narrative of 7 October promoted by Netanyahu and his allies has become dominant, despite doubts over his own failings.

Security is now even more central than before in political discourse. Fears of persecution, even annihilation, linked to memories of the Holocaust, have been deliberately fanned.

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The international isolation engendered by the conduct of the war on Gaza is, on the one hand, a point of criticism of the current government, but, on the other, as previously mentioned, also a powerful contributor to the siege mentality and paranoia that help the far right.

This is not the work of one man, but different leadership could at the very least have mitigated some of this, if not changed the course of history.

Netanyahu, after all, took Israel from a country that in 1996 was in the midst of an admittedly struggling peace process with the Palestinians, to a besieged nation, increasingly relying on military muscle, with diminishing returns.

Getting rid of him in a decisive manner might not change everything at once, but it is the bare minimum requirement for opening up the potential for new possibilities.