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Israel's government of 'national immunity'

- The Jewish people have an exclusive and inalienable right to all parts of the Land of Israel. The government will promote and develop the settlement of all parts of the Land of Israel — in the Galilee, the Negev, the Golan and Judea and Samaria.
- The government will actively work to boost national security and provide personal security to its citizens, while resolutely and determinedly fighting violence and terrorism.
 - from '[The Basic Principles of Israel's 37th Government](#)' (translated by The Times of Israel)

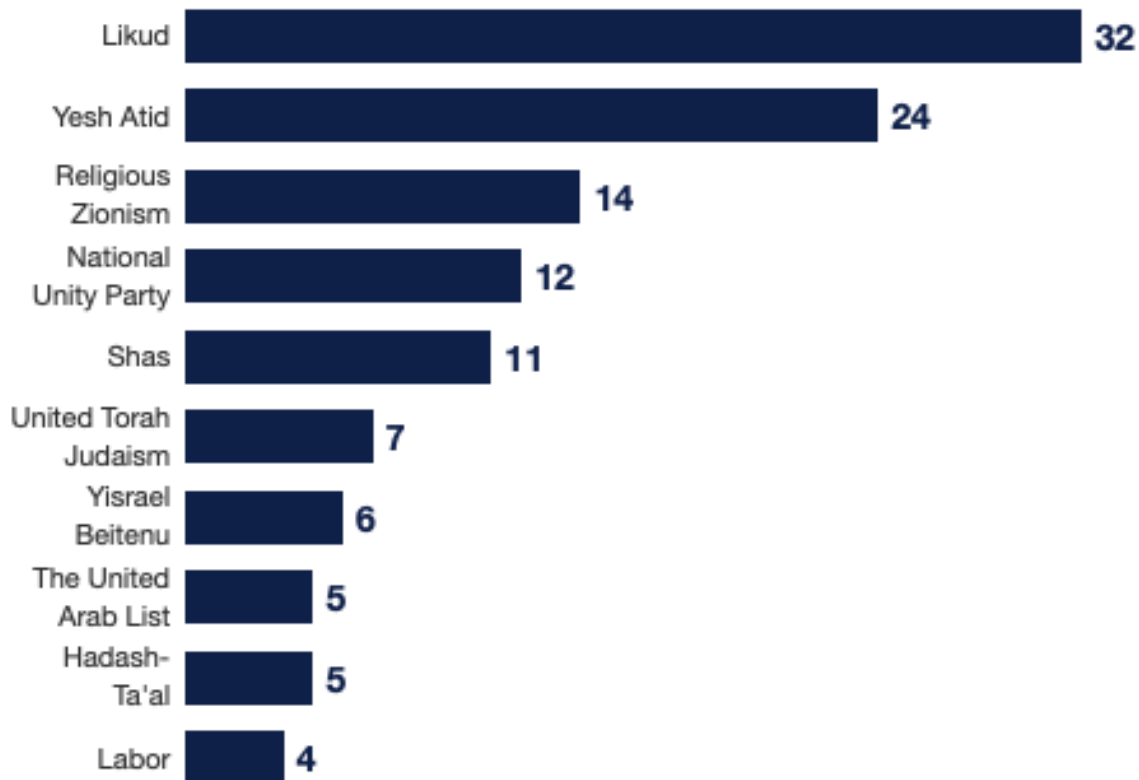


On the 29th December, after two months of horse-trading with his new coalition partners, Benjamin Netanyahu was finally sworn in as Israel's Prime Minister for the sixth time. As the head of Israel's 37th government, Netanyahu leads an intransigent alliance of far-right religious Zionist factions and ultra-Orthodox parties with a clear agenda to annex as much as possible of East Jerusalem and the West Bank. They will undoubtedly seek to entrench Israel's apartheid regime more aggressively across the whole of historic Palestine.

The new coalition commands 64 seats in the Knesset out of a total of 120. Elections on the 1st November returned 32 Likud MKs (Members of the the Knesset), affording Netanyahu the opportunity to form a government, but obliging him to ally Likud with parties even further to the right: Shas (11 MKs), United Torah Judaism (7 MKs) and Religious Zionism (14 MKs).

The most recent six elections in Israel have led to notoriously fractious, volatile and short-lived governments. The previous 'Bennett-Lapid' government, cobbled together as a so-called 'coalition of change', collapsed in June under the weight of its own implausibility. It sputtered to an end on the 21st June when Prime Minister Naftali Bennett dissolved parliament and announced his intention to retire from

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politics 'in perpetuity'.

In a political arena dominated by personality rather than policy differences, what united the previous government was animus towards 'Bibi'. However, in most important respects, as 'Operation Break the Wave' has shown, this was a government of continuity rather than change.

'Naftali Bennett and Avigdor Lieberman, who in the past served as Netanyahu's chiefs of staff, Gideon Sa'ar, who was his cabinet secretary, and Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz, who were ministers in his cabinet, have repeated Netanyahu's crimes and follies in the occupied Palestinian territories.'

On June 6th, the Knesset refused to renew 'emergency regulations', dating from the 1960s, that place illegal colonial settlers under Israeli legal authority, albeit they are living in areas of the West Bank that are otherwise under the military governance of the Coordinator of Government Activity in the Territories (COGAT). Rather than see this key piece of apartheid legislation voted down a second time, and therefore lost, Bennett chose to impale his political career on the Separation Fence.

Citing the judgement of Solomon, Bennett cast himself as the forlorn mother unwilling to cut Baby Israel in two: 'I chose to be the mother who preserves the child's life also at a heavy personal price.'

Netanyahu's eight seat majority makes this potentially the most stable coalition he has led since the elections of 2009. But, if so, it will be a stability of instability. This latest iteration of bellicose Israeli democracy is certain to bring turmoil to Israel's neighbours across the Middle East, to Palestinians and to Israelis themselves.



There are already mutterings of dissatisfaction. 'Likud MPs that felt so victorious in November with their 32 seats and total dedication to their leader turned in December into pictures of bitter resentment and disappointment. They began to refer to Netanyahu's coalition agreements as a 'liquidation sale': liquidation of portfolios, power and even dignity, anything to attract his coalition partners.'



Shas and United Torah Judaism (UTJ) are parties representing Israel's two main Haredi communities, ultra-Orthodox minorities who make up around 13% of the Israeli population. Shas represents the Sephardic Jewish community, while UTJ represents the orthodox Ashkenazi community.

Haredi communities in Israel are both significantly separate from and generally poorer than the majority community. Haredi men's participation level in the workforce is only 48 percent, much of it in the form of state-funded job-creation schemes for religious functionaries (and their average salary of around \$2,000 per month is 60 percent below the national average for men)

Young ultra-Orthodox men, who were on a path towards greater integration into the workforce and acceptance of military service, will now reverse course as, under the coalition agreement, the state will dramatically increase its funding to their yeshivas.



The leader of UTJ, Yitzhak Issachar Goldknopf, is chair of the 'Committee for the Sanctity of the Sabbath', and has previously fought for stricter observance in the Israeli public space. Unlike most members of the Haredi community he represents, Goldknopf is a prosperous businessman and real estate dealer who will serve as Minister of Housing and Construction in the new cabinet.



His deputy, Meir Porush, will serve as Minister of Jerusalem Affairs and Jewish Tradition. In March 2016, Porush was reprimanded by the Knesset ethics committee for his comments about Jewish women activists who want to make the Western Wall a site where Jewish women can pray freely. He is said to have said that the 'Women of the Wall... should be thrown to the dogs.'

Before he could seal the deal and finalise his cabinet appointments Netanyahu had to exploit his parliamentary majority to fiddle with the Israeli constitution. On the 27th December the Knesset passed two amendments to Israel's 'Basic Law: The Government'. The first, originally debated in the Knesset on the 13th December, the so-called 'Deri Law', changed the definition of moral turpitude so that only a recent custodial prison sentence would exclude someone from serving as a minister.



In 1999, the leader of Shas, Aryeh Deri, once Israel's youngest-ever Minister, was convicted of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, and given a three-year jail sentence, of which he served 22 months. It appears that, for electoral purposes, this conviction is now regarded as 'spent'. However, in December 2021, he was forced to resign from the Knesset as part of a plea deal after admitting tax fraud offences. The 'Deri Law' has allowed him to return as Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Health and Minister of the Interior and Periphery. As part of the deal, he is scheduled to become Finance Minister in two years time!

This ruling is likely to be challenged in Israel's Supreme Court. As former Chief of Staff Dan Halutz has said, 'How can we feel safe with a criminal person responsible for the treasury of the State of Israel?'



The second amendment to the Basic Law was introduced to allow the leader of the Religious Zionism bloc, Bezalel Smotrich, to serve in more than one post at the same time. Smotrich has now been appointed as both Minister of Finance and as Second Minister in the Defence Ministry. His post in the Defence Ministry has also necessitated a change in the Israeli chain of command in the occupied Palestinian Territories, giving him the authority to appoint the head of COGAT and to oversee the Civil Administration which is responsible, among other things, for settlement building in the West Bank.

Smotrich, who has a history of violent, direct action, and last October, led a settler blockade of Nablus, has spent his whole life living in and agitating on behalf of Israel's illegal colonial settlements. He currently lives in a house illegally-constructed on Palestinian land on the outskirts of the settlement of Kedumim.

He is co-founder of the organisation Regavim, which harasses Palestinian communities by monitoring them and pursuing legal action in the Israeli court system against any construction undertaken without an Israeli permit. Regavim's activities have contributed to a significant increase in demolitions since it was founded in 2006.



Many commentators have suggested that the true winner of the November 1st elections was Itamar Ben-Gvir, leader of the Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power or Jewish Strength) faction within the Religious Zionism bloc. A one-time member of the banned Kahanist party, Kach, Ben-Gvir is a supremacist provocateur who delights in threatening and harassing Palestinian communities.

He lives in Givat Ha'avot, part of the infamous, illegal settlement of Kiryat Arba, in the Palestinian city of Hebron. Ben-Gvir has been arrested and charged dozens of times, and convicted on at least eight occasions, for membership in a terrorist organisation, hate speech, interfering with the work of the police and more. In recent times, he has played a key role in attempts to evict Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem.

Now, following legislation passed in the Knesset on the 28th December, the so-called 'Ben-Gvir Law', he has been made National Security Minister with ministerial control over Israel's Border Police. According to the coalition agreement, the Border Police is to be made into an independent entity within 90 days from the government's swearing-in, and placed under the personal authority of the National Security Minister. In effect, the Border Police, who have played a significant role in 'Operation Break the Wave' and, also, act as riot police in areas of East Jerusalem, will become Ben-Gvir's personal militia.

In October's notorious incident in Sheikh Jarrah, during which Ben-Gvir brandished a firearm, he repeatedly called for police to use live fire on Palestinian protestors.

'Don't look here. If they throw stones, shoot them,' he was heard shouting at the police as he waved his gun in the air. 'The politicians are tying the hands of our cops,' he later said in a tweet that included a picture of him with the pistol. 'It cannot be that Arabs throw stones next to cops and the cops don't respond with fire.'



Ben-Gvir has played a prominent role in the 'Temple Mount Movement', attempting to change the status quo agreement around the Haram al-Sharif and the Al Aqsa compound. On the 28th December, Jordan's King Abdullah II warned the incoming Israeli government not to cross Jordan's 'red lines' with regard to Jerusalem's holy sites, and expressed concern over the potential for a significant outbreak of Palestinian unrest. Hamas has also issued a warning that a visit by Ben-Gvir would 'blow up the situation'. Nevertheless, early on the morning of 3rd January, Ben-Gvir made a secretive visit to the Al Aqsa compound under heavy police protection.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has given an assurance that 'security assistance to Israel is sacrosanct.' In possibly one of the most feeble-minded statements among many feeble-minded statements by US politicians, he said, the US 'will also continue to unequivocally oppose any acts that undermine the prospects of a two-state solution.' These 'acts' would include settlement expansion, moves toward annexation of the West Bank, disruption to the historic status quo at holy sites, demolitions and evictions, and incitement to violence, the exact recipe being cooked-up by Netanyahu and his gang.

Watch this space!