

ISRAELI POLITICS

As Israel holds its fourth election in two years, Netanyahu's contentious record divides his nation

To some, he is Mr Security. Others note that he is on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

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Workers instal a banner of Benjamin Netanyahu ahead of the March 23 election in Israel. | Corrine Kern/Reuters

Compared to Israel's domestic political chaos, the coronavirus crisis seems like a minor problem. On Tuesday, the country participated in its fourth national election in less than two years since no party has been getting enough of a majority to govern for a full term. No coalition within a single ideological camp is either sustainable or possible any more. The last coalition of the camp that is ideologically right-wing and ultra-nationalist lasted for just seven months.

Israel has been without an annual budget since 2018. The civil services and key policy positions are constantly in ad hoc mode. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many social factions openly defied the

state authorities and even the law enforcements agencies.

In short, Israel has been on autopilot mode for a long time. It is a wonder that it still has the socio-political stamina for perpetual polling. Not more than 30% of people surveyed think that this election will end the political stalemate.

The Israeli political system is broken as it offers no solution election after election for political stability and much-needed restoration of public trust, according to the latest studies of think tanks and policy advisers. Many are concerned about how Israeli democracy will do in the near future.

The Israel Democracy Institute and The Institute for National Security Studies, two renowned think-tanks, say that for first time, Israel faces a crisis that has been created not by the external world but by its internal policy paralysis, governance instability, social-cultural divisions within the Jewish population and erosion of state institutions.

In a way, Israel is fighting for its soul and as is so often the case in human life, it is a struggle within oneself that is truly existential.

No Bibi, only Bibi

In this election as in the last one in March 2020, there has been only one key item on the agenda for Israeli society – that is, the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, nicknamed Bibi. It is difficult to separate him from Israel. Israel stands deeply divided about him. He represents very complex strengths and weaknesses but election after election, he continues to win the ultra-nationalist and religious pockets that his support base. Understanding his politics or legacy (now when he has been head of the state for more than decade) may help us understand the impulsive nature of Israeli domestic politics.

In the last ten years in the top job, Netanyahu not only achieved stability and security (an extremely important priority for the Israelis) but also big diplomatic victories. In the Israeli popular imagination, he is Mr Security . Many trust him the most to be able to fight the world for the cause of the State of Israel and for Jews.

Tens of Thousands of Israelis Protest Netanyahu's Corruption
Ahead of Tuesday's Elections <https://t.co/A7xbTbRkqp>

— Democracy Now! (@democracynow) March 23, 2021

He single-handedly ensured that the conflict with the Palestinians did not hurt Israel, Hamas is perceived to have been deterred enough, the Syrian civil war did not threaten Israel and Netanyahu is the one who got the [Iranian nuclear deal nullified](#). He convinced the United States (especially his friend Donald Trump) to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and that the the Golan Heights, captured territories of Syria, belonged to Israel.

His master stroke of diplomacy was when he obtained the Abraham Accords in August 2020, which earned Israel much-awaited regional normalisation with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. Israel achieved this extraordinary diplomatic breakthrough with some key Arab states that once opposed peace, recognition and negotiation with Israel from Khartoum in 1967.

Netanyahu long believed that Israel would win peace (it is the usual and narrow diplomatic kind) with the region without territorial concessions or fulfilling the pre-conditions of a two-state solution for the Palestinians. Getting the Abraham Accords was quite a moment for Netanyahu as Israel did not have to compromise much.

Serious crises

For Israeli voters who consider national interest in terms of power, military security and realpolitik, Netanyahu is at the top of the list. With these and many more perceived material successes, he has been able to secure the trust of the Israeli majority repeatedly in the past and still enjoys a good base for his kind of leadership.

However, Israel has been through some serious crises from within because of his domestic political positioning. He is on trial for three serious cases of bribery, fraud and breach of trust and his method of fighting these have weakened the state institutions and public trust. Several civil society and political groups have been holding protests in front of his official residence in Jerusalem every Saturday evening for a year now. Israel's deeply divided society is further divided over him.

Israel lived long with the assumptions of a strong military state, retaliation and security-/fear-driven foreign policy. This ecosystem has created an idea of "good leadership" that Netanyahu has mastered. Moving on from Netanyahu would mean first of all moving away from the old self and creating a new ecosystem of peace, compromise, reconciliation and self-questioning. Israel's current political crisis is a symptom of much deeper social and cultural disarray that needs revision.

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