

Democracy, Israel's prized possession, is facing a grave risk

Israeli will do well with a democratic State rather than a narrowly defined security-military-capable State. For long, Israel has focused on carving out domestic unity around the issue of fighting the external enemy. But some crises are internal. Israel needs to look within and find ways to overcome its domestic political deadlock and find common ground between its liberal social norms and an increasingly inward and polarised polity.

By Khinvraj Jangid

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Israel is known for its hard power — conjuring up images of its military strength, intelligence apparatus, arms diplomacy, and a developed economy. Israel achieved all of these in the last seven decades, in spite of its existential issues since 1948 amid multiple regional wars. Since soft power is also an important consideration, Israel has presented itself, legitimately, as the only democracy in West Asia.

But the last four elections in Israel — in April and September 2019, March 2020 and on March 23, 2021 — have exposed the inner workings of its democracy. Among leading democracies, Israel now has had the most frequent number of national elections in recent years, and its democratically elected governments have survived for an average of 2.3 years rather than a four-year term since 1996.

In the last two years, Israel has gone to the polls four times, and it may well go for a fifth round if there is no one leader capable of forming a coalition government with 61 seats (out of 120 total seats in parliament). Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party, Likud, has 30 seats, but he is opposed by a variety of different political leaders who are otherwise of the same ideological bent such as Benny Gantz, Yair Lapid or Gideon Saar.

Netanyahu once worked well with all these leaders at different times but now faces stiff resistance. He is also going through a legal trial for three criminal cases — bribery, fraud and breach of trust. Looking at the major issues and slogans of the last four elections, it is clear that Israeli society is polarised on one big issue — are you with Netanyahu or against him? All other issues — from Covid-19 and its severe impact on the Israeli economy to the lack of an annual budget since 2018, from rising prices to the fact that Israel has high unemployment —

have all got relegated to the background as the electorate stands deeply divided over Netanyahu, who has served more than a decade as prime minister.

Netanyahu has refused to resign from office or leave politics until his name is cleared by the court. He fought this election while on trial and he may very well stake claim to form the government soon. What makes him so indispensable within certain pockets of Israeli society is his perceived strong position on security and his diplomatic acumen.

National security plays a crucial role in Israeli domestic politics as well as in its foreign policy. Henry Kissinger once said that Israel does not have a foreign policy, but domestic politics which is over-concerned with security. Netanyahu has projected himself as a leader who will fight the world for Israel and the Jews, and has navigated international politics to ensure that Israel does not have to accept a two-state solution on the Palestinian issue.

His followers rate him highly for ensuring American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and for the Abraham Accords, which led to a rapprochement with Arab states such as United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. His excellent personal relationship with leaders such as Narendra Modi and Vladimir Putin is seen as a source of strength for Israel. On the charges of corruption, his followers think they are conspiracies. Israeli will do well with a democratic State rather than a narrowly defined security-military-capable State. For long, Israel has focused on carving out domestic unity around the issue of fighting the external enemy. But some crises are internal. Israel needs to look within and find ways to overcome its domestic political deadlock and find common ground between its liberal social norms and an increasingly inward and polarised polity.

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The views expressed are personal