

## Change Coalition and The New Era in Israel

In Israel, the Bennett-Lapid coalition formed the government in a vote of confidence in the Knesset on 13 June. So the two-year election marathon is over for now. A government rotation led by right-wing Yamina party's leader Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, leader of the centrist Yesh Atid party, was implemented in partnership with eight other parties. The new government has removed Benjamin Netanyahu - who has been prime minister since 2009 - and started a new era in the country.

During the election process, there was a grouping between political parties that outstripped ideological rhetoric; anti-Netanyahu and pro-Netanyahu.

Netanyahu was the longest-serving prime minister in Israel with a total of 15 years in office - in 1996-1999 and 2009-2021. A hawkish politician is known for his opposition to peace talks in the 1990s, Netanyahu also brought security policies to the forefront in the 2000s. Netanyahu, who equates Israel's survival with his own existence, almost tried to prove it with his attacks on Palestine. The last quarter-century of Israeli politics was dominated by identity politics. Netanyahu has deepened the polarization in the society with his harsh rhetoric on dissidents. A large part of the public also attributed the country's fourth election in just two years to Netanyahu's personal ambitions. In particular, his insistence on continuing his political career despite three bribery and corruption cases against him that strengthened the anti-Netanyahu front.

Although Netanyahu received the highest number of votes in the election, he failed to form a government. Yair Lapid convinced Bennett and Abbas to form the Change Coalition.

The eight-party coalition includes three right-wing, two centrist, two left-wing, and one Arab party. The right-wing parties consist of Bennett's Yamina Party, Gideon Saar's New Hope Party, and Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beitanu (*Israel Our Home*) Party. The Labor Party led by Merav Michaeli and the Meretz Party led by Nitzan Horowitz, which have secular Zionist understanding and supports a two-state solution, form the left-wing of the government. Benny Gantz's Blue-White Party and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid Party represent the centrist element of the government. In the Change Coalition, three politicians are particularly noted: Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid, and Mansour Abbas.

Naftali Bennett, who became prime minister in the new government, began his political life as Netanyahu's deputy in 2006. He was then elected president of The Jewish Home party in 2012 and parted ways with Netanyahu. Bennett held several different ministries in Netanyahu-era coalition governments. "I've killed a lot of Arabs in my life, and there's no problem with that," the hardline religious-nationalist said in 2013. Bennett is also known to have accused coalition partner Mansour Abbas of being a "terrorist supporter" in the past. Bennett has a large number of votes from Jewish settlements and is known for his anti-Palestinian rhetoric. Therefore, his current position as prime minister in an administration with Arab and left-wing parties is one of the most curious issues about the new government.

A prominent figure in the Change Coalition is Yair Lapid. After being given the task of forming the government, Lapid had two options in front of him: accepting Bennett as prime minister or making the fifth election. Lapid gave the priority to Bennett, even though his party was the second-largest group in parliament. Moreover, it is not known if the Change Coalition will continue in office until the third year, in which Lapid will take over. Lapid, who stands out for his liberal ideas, argues that it is necessary to balance the democratic and Jewish identities of Israel.

The most notable name of the Change Coalition is Mansour Abbas. Because for the first time in history, an Arab party representing Israel's Arab citizens is directly involved in the Israeli government.

The roots of the United Arab List (*Raam*), led by Abbas, date back to the 1970s. In 1971, Sheikh Abdullah Derwish founded the Islamic Movement in Israel, which adheres to the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood. Due to differences of opinion arising in the 1990s over the Oslo Accords and accession to the Knesset, the movement was divided into the south and north wing. The north wing, led by Raid Salah, continues to boycott Israeli elections. The south wing, led by Derwish, formed the *Raam* to participate in the elections. Abbas participated in previous elections along with three different Arab parties. But because

of a disagreement with the List's left-wing parties, he participated alone in the March 2021 elections and secured four MPs in the Knesset.

Abbas' main expectation from the government was to allocate funds to improve the socio-economic conditions of Arabs and Bedouins, and to end racism in the law. Arabs, which constitute 20% of Israel's population, have been subjected to racist policies for many years. In this context, Abbas' government partner - although he received the support of part of the Arab community - had also led to the reaction of many Palestinians. Abbas has been criticized for legitimizing Israel's occupation while the apartheid regime rhetoric against Israel has become widespread in Europe and America. It is estimated that the steps taken by the Change Coalition regarding Israeli Arab citizens will also affect Abbas' political career.

### **What awaits Israel's Change Coalition?**

One of the government's priority agendas is to eliminate the possibility of Netanyahu from ever being prime minister again. In this context, the new government will first take decisions to restrict the term of the prime minister, which has been discussed for a long time and to prevent people with legal cases from becoming prime minister.

The more important and long-term problem that awaits the Change Coalition is the polarization caused by the increasing determinacy of social identities. In Israeli society, identity polarization such as Jewish-Arab, right-left, religious-secular, Ashkenazi-Mizrahi have become more evident, and Israelis identify themselves through these identities. The fact that four elections are held in two years is also the epitome of this situation. These different identities in society are reflected in the coalition supported by the eight parties. In this regard, it is estimated that the life of a government formed by parties with different ideological backgrounds will be short-lived. But if a new election period is entered, the same problems will only reoccur. On the other hand, although the government partners have different political views, they seem to be pragmatists in their decision-making.

Although members of the Change Coalition extend or shorten the life of the government through their decisions, the polarization in the society continues. But by thinking about the causes of the polarization and putting an end to racist policies, more permanent solutions can be created.

### **Turkey-Israel Relations**

During Netanyahu's terms, Turkey-Israel relations faced many crises and followed a tense route. The mutual harsh accusations of the Turkish and Israeli leaders have been reflected in the media. But this tension in diplomatic relations was not reflected in the commercial area, and the foreign trade volume of both countries remained in a certain balance. It is not expected that political relations with Turkey will have a visibly positive profile during the Change Coalition government. Although some talks have been held to improve relations, concrete steps are not expected in the short term. In the new period, Egypt and Jordan are expected to be the leading countries in the region in terms of negotiation with Palestine and communication with Israel. In addition, normalization attempts with Arab countries initiated in Netanyahu's era will continue, and negotiations will be held with other countries. Therefore, in this process, it is expected that Israel will increase its political partner alternatives in the Middle East.