

# National Unity

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**M**Y FIRST REACTION after the election was: “Oh, no! Not a National Unity Government, please!”

In my first article after the election, I devoted a large part to the danger of a “national unity” government, though at the time the possibility of such a government, based on Likud and the Labor Party, seemed very remote indeed.

But, looking at the figures, I had a gnawing suspicion: this looks like something that will end with a Likud-Labor combination.

Now, suddenly, this possibility has raised its head. Everybody is talking about it.

All my emotions rebel against this possibility. But I owe it to myself and my readers to examine this option dispassionately. Though pure logic is a rare commodity in politics, let's try to exercise it.

IS A “national unity government” good or bad for Israel?

Let's look at the numbers first.

To form a government in Israel, one needs at least 61 seats in the 120-seat Knesset. Likud (30) and Labor (24) have 54 between them. It can be assumed that Binyamin Netanyahu almost certainly wants to renew his party's historic alliance with the two orthodox factions, the Ashkenazi Torah Party (6) and the Oriental Shas (7)—together 67, quite enough for a stable government.

Netanyahu seems to be determined to add Moshe Kahlon's new party too (10), as a kind of subcontractor for the economy. Together an imposing 77.

Who would be left outside? First of all, the Joint Arab Party (13), whose new leader, Eyman Odeh, would automatically assume the title of “Leader of the Opposition”—a first for Israel. No Arab has ever held this title, with all its prestige and privileges.

Then there is Meretz (5), reduced to a small leftist voice.

And then there are the two extreme rightist parties: the one of Naftali Bennett (reduced to 8) and the even smaller one of Avigdor Lieberman (now a mere 6).

Somewhere in between is the star of the previous elections, Yair Lapid, (now reduced to 11).

The initial prospect seemed to be a far rightist coal-

ition, consisting of Likud, the two orthodox parties, the two far-rightist parties and Kahlon—altogether 67. (The orthodox refuse to sit with Lapid in the same government.)

These then, with minor variations, are the two options.

WHY DOES Netanyahu prefer—as it now seems—the National Unity option?

First of all, he detests his two co-rightists—Bennett and Lieberman. But you don't have to like someone in order to take them into your government.

A far more important reason is the growing fear of Israel's isolation in the world.

Netanyahu is now engaged in a ferocious fight against President Obama. He opposes the Iranian deal with everything he has. But this deal is also underwritten by the European Union, Germany, France, Russia and China. Netanyahu against the entire world.

Netanyahu has no illusions. There are hundreds of ways Obama and the European Union can punish Netanyahu. Israel is almost totally dependent on the US as far as weapons are concerned. It needs the US veto in the UN, and US subsidies also come in handy. The Israeli economy is also heavily dependent on European markets.

In this situation, it would be nice to have Isaac Herzog on board. He is the ultimate fig-leaf, a nice liberal leftist as foreign minister, son of a president, grandson of an Irish chief rabbi, well mannered, European looking, English speaking. He would pacify the fears of the world's foreign ministers, cushion Netanyahu's rough edges, prevent diplomatic crises.

Labor in the government would also block the deluge of anti-democratic bills which accumulated in the last Knesset. It would also halt the planned onslaught on the Supreme Court, Israel's last bastion against the barbarians. The leading group of Likud extremists make no secret of their intention to castrate the Court and to enact the bills they hold in store.

Labor might also mitigate the economic policies of Likud, popularly known as “swinish capitalism”, which have made the poor poorer and the ultra-rich even richer. Housing might become affordable again, the decline of the health and education systems might be halted.

The prospect of becoming ministers again makes the mouths of some Labor functionaries water. One of them,

Eytan Kabel, a close ally of Herzog, has already published a statement totally supporting Netanyahu's Iran policy, raising many knowing eyebrows.

The Labor Party has yet to take a critical position towards Netanyahu's Iranian stand. It only criticizes—halfheartedly, if not quarterheartedly—the Prime Minister's attacks on Obama.

ON THE other side, what's so wrong about a National Unity Government?

Well, first of all, it leaves the country without an effective opposition.

In order to function, democracy needs an opposition that develops alternative policies and provides a choice at the next elections. If all the major parties are in the government, what alternative forces and ideas can provide the necessary choice?

A cynic may remark here that the Labor Party was not much of an opposition anyway. It supported last year's superfluous Gaza War with all its atrocities. Its ally, Tzipi Livni, has dragged the Palestinian negotiations on and on without coming an inch nearer to peace. Labor's opposition to the rightist economic policies was feeble.

Truth is, Labor is not built for opposition. It was in power for 44 consecutive years (from 1933 to 1977, first in the Zionist Organization and then in the new state). To be "governmental" is deeply ingrained in its nature. Even under Likud governments, Labor was never a determined and effective opposition.

But for Leftists, the main objection to a Unity Government is exactly what may induce Netanyahu to install it: because it provides the big fig leaf.

Labor in the government will blunt all foreign criticism of Netanyahu's policies and actions. Israeli Leftists,

who despairingly pray for foreign pressure on Israel, such as an all-inclusive boycott (BDS) and pro-Palestinian UN resolutions, will be disappointed. To get such a campaign moving, you need a far-right government in Jerusalem.

Under the National Unity umbrella, Netanyahu can continue to enlarge the settlements, sabotage the Palestinian Authority, conduct endless negotiations that lead nowhere, even make war from time to time.

After four such years, the Labor Party may cease to be an effective force in Israeli politics. Some might think that this is a good thing. With this degenerating force out of the way, a new generation of political activists may have a chance to eventually create a real opposition party.

PERHAPS THE decision on this will not be shaped in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, but in Las Vegas.

I have a lurking suspicion that in reality Netanyahu takes his orders from Sheldon Adelson.

Adelson owns Netanyahu as much as he owns his casino in Macau or the US Republican party. If he wants to install a Republican president, in order to add the White House to his portfolio of assets, he needs to widen the chasm between the Obama administration and the Israeli government. This might cause US Jews to flock en masse to the Republican banner.

If this suspicion is true, Netanyahu will not really woo the Labor Party, but only use it as a trick to beat down the price his prospective far-right partners are demanding.

TWO JEWS are on a cruise.

In the middle of the night, one of them wakes the other: "Quick! Get up! The ship is sinking!"

The other only yawns. "What do you care? Is it your ship?"