

COMPLICATED, VOLATILE, THE DESCRIPTORS OF ISRAEL'S POLITICS

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In Parliament | Photo Credit: AFP

Israel is to call for yet another national election, its fifth since 2019, as Naftali Bennett's coalition government has ended abruptly. Israel's Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, has succeeded him as the caretaker Prime Minister and Israel is to go to the polls in either October or November 2022. In April, Mr. Bennett had planned to travel to India to celebrate 30 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries. His visit was cancelled at the last minute due to the rise in terror attacks in Israel and the crisis of a failing coalition.

In the scene of a rapidly changing domestic politics, Naftali Bennett and his right-wing members were constantly targeted by Opposition leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu for having an alliance with an Arab party and giving work permits to the Palestinians from Gaza. The coalition whip, Idit Silam, left the government in April and said this government has not been Jewish enough or loyal to the right-wing constituencies. Accommodation of ideological differences was rejected; ideological compromise was seen as weakening the state of Israel. Mr Bennett could not create unity in diversity and offered to step down.

Mr. Bennett gave his 'exit statement' to *The New York Times* columnist, Bret Stephens ("Naftali Bennett's Exit Interview") who reported their telephone conversation; the first thing Mr Bennett said in the interview was: "In a world where domestic polarization is becoming almost the single biggest challenge, the experiment succeeded (the fact that his government was in power for one year and showed that there is an alternative to hardline leaders such as Netanyahu)". His experiment was putting together a diverse coalition of eight odd parties together with his friend and partner, Yair Lapid. They were called 'agents of change'.

This coalition spelt exceptional change in domestic Israeli politics as it had Ministers and the parliamentary unity of the right, centre, left. For the first time, there was an Arab party as well. A year ago, while making his first speech in Parliament, Mr. Bennett said, "I am proud of the ability to sit together with people with very different views than mine." He invited all his ideological opponents to join the government with the realisation that Israeli society and politics have become too divided, toxic, and violently radical. He worried for national unity and knew Israel is threatened from within — divisions across the right and the left, religious and secular and Mirahim (oriental Jews) and Ashkanazim (European Jews) have caused political instability for too long. The forecast for the next national election is also worrisome as no political party, including Mr. Netanyahu's Likud, is likely to get a majority of its own according to the pollsters.

Mr. Netanyahu was one of the factors behind the formation of the coalition; he has also helped in its failure. Otherwise, ideologically divided parties were compelled to come together by the logic of 'anyone but Netanyahu' and give Mr. Bennett a historic opportunity. Mr. Netanyahu, as the Opposition leader, ensured this would not last for long. Despite him being indicted for corruption charges and a trial he did not leave any stone unturned in Parliament to oppose the government. It was nothing less than an audacious decision on his part to oppose the bill extending Israeli laws in the West Bank last week that brought down the Bennett government. Mr. Netanyahu said to Ms. Silam who defected, "Idit, you're proof that what guides you is the concern for the Jewish identity of Israel, the concern for the land of Israel, and I welcome you back home to the national camp. I call on all those elected by the national camp to join Idit and

come home. You will be welcomed with complete respect and with open arms.”

Mr. Netanyahu, the orator of rhetoric in Israeli politics, has been sharp in his attacks on this government for having an Arab party (labelled as the ‘terror supporters’) and left parties (labelled as anti-national because of their support for the peace process and two-state solution with the Palestinians). In short, Mr. Bennett lost the battle of narratives even when he meant sincere *tikkun* (the Hebrew word for repair) of Israel’s internal divisions with moderation and compromises.

It is the right-wing politicians, of Mr. Bennett’s own party, who felt they have been making too many compromises and now need to revive their radical positions to uphold macho-nationalist, ultra-religious constituencies where a compromise of core principles is not rewarded. Whether this is true or merely an assumption will be known after the fresh elections. For now, Israeli domestic politics is becoming too polarised. Mr. Bennett still thinks that the new government that will come will have to build consensus and agree to compromise because no one is going to get a majority (61 out of 120 seats) in Parliament.

Henry Kissinger once said that Israel does not have a foreign policy but domestic politics. Israel is a house that is constantly in chaos; domestic issues overpower leaders so much that Israel fails to have long-drawn pro-active foreign policy. As a small state, Israel is inward-looking and parochial.

The Times of Israel has reported that “Bennett said he should have focused more on managing his own party and domestic politics while he was prime minister, and less on making progress with international leaders including Ukraine’s Volodymyr Zelensky and the United Arab Emirates’ Mohamed bin Zayed”.

Mr. Bennett has attempted to mediate between Russia and Ukraine when the conflict between them started. Israel has also signed a Free Trade Agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which is a historical development considering the amount of regional isolation Israel has had to endure. There is a new chapter opening in Israel-Turkey relations. There is a buzz with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan as well. Next month, the United States President, Joe Biden, is making his first trip to Israel and there is a scheduled joint summit level meeting of the Middle East Quad (now called I2U2, or India, Israel, the U.S. and the UAE). So, not only is a celebration of 30 years of India-Israel relations awaiting a stable Israeli government but there are also other very significant geo-political changes.

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