

Netanyahu's 'big bang': A preliminary analysis

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Israel may finally have gotten the political “big bang” that voters thought they were getting during the elections three years ago. The agreement bringing the centrist and pragmatic Kadima party into a wider government coalition, under Netanyahu's leadership, creates the stable and broad political base necessary for tackling Israel's major challenges. The ideological fringes and interest groups on all sides are isolated, and their artificial political power, resulting from the ability to bring down narrow coalitions, has been deflated.

While a totally fresh start in the complex Israeli political system is unrealistic, the new coalition, based on a wide Zionist consensus, provides unprecedented opportunities for addressing and perhaps even fixing many of the dysfunctional components. The agenda items for this new government provide more than enough urgent issues to fill the 18 months until elections must be held. Even prioritizing them will not be easy. And governing with a coalition of 94 Knesset members (more than three-quarters of the total) has some significant limitations.

The immediate trigger that almost brought down the current coalition was the urgency of replacing the “Tal Law” that granted exemptions from military service to the ultra-Orthodox sector and was struck down in the courts. More broadly, relations between this narrow group and the wider population, the unjustified economic subsidies they receive, and the exaggerated political role of the rabbinical leadership, will now be open for a long overdue correction.

Wider economic reform is another immediate issue, particularly the need to reverse the huge divide between Israel's richest one-percent and the poorer and usually-underpaid general population. The Jewish principles of social justice had become empty slogans, and last summer's student-led protests rightfully demanded affordable housing, improvements in public transportation and the break-up of monopolies that raised prices with impunity. With less dependence on wealthy political donors, the “big bang” government can address these issues and repair the badly frayed social contract.

The longer-term social and economic impacts of this broad coalition extend, potentially, beyond the next year and a half, and reopen the door to long-overdue changes in outmoded governance processes and structures. Such basic constitutional changes, which can only be adopted by a wide consensus, are necessary to prevent a return to the old system in which small factions and fringe groups maneuvered between the major parties.

On the complex issues of borders, settlements and negotiations with the Palestinians, the new government can belatedly confront the violent fringe that has sought to impose its views. The pragmatic consensus that supports a stable peace, if possible, and recognizes the costs to Israel of unending occupation and responsibility for millions of Palestinian Arabs, can reassert its voice.

This does not mean a return to the vulnerability of the 1949 cease-fire lines, or destruction of communities built in good faith across that “green line.” But now, the government has the credibility to pursue negotiations for a two-state framework based on compromise. If Israelis see a basis for stable agreement, including an end to invented Palestinian histories and efforts to flood Israel with millions of third-generation “refugees,” the majority will accept the costs. And if such negotiations reach another dead end, a broad-based Israeli government can move toward implementing the consensus approach to borders and leave the Palestinians to decide how to govern themselves.

A broad unity government anchored by Likud and Kadima — the two largest Israeli parties — will also have the legitimacy and stability to deal carefully and seriously with the wider regional challenges. If Iran continues to move toward nuclear weapons, all options are still on the table, and do not need to be spelled out again. The presence of three former IDF chiefs of Staff in this government is, in itself, a form of deterrence, (although on many issues, the narrow military backgrounds of party leaders are not always assets). In addition, given the unprecedented and unpredictable changes in Egypt and Syria, Israel presents an image of stability and democratic strength. New Egyptian leaders who might seek to divert public attention from economic and other issues by renouncing the peace treaty with Israel might now have second thoughts regarding the potential response.

For Israel's Arab citizens and other minorities, a more stable and coherent Israeli leadership can reduce the impact of extremists and separatist groups, and strengthen the options for equal opportunity. The Israeli Jewish majority has shown that it remains united on core identity issues, but, as in the case of European, Islamic and other nation-states characterized by a dominant culture, minority rights need to be safeguarded.

Finally, the fact that this political maneuver took most Israeli pundits by surprise demonstrates the degree to which Netanyahu's strategic and political skills are underestimated and misrepresented. Ideological and personal factors have blinded analysts and foreign political leaders, including heads of state, to the caution and deliberation with which Netanyahu has governed in the past three years. There are also important lessons to be learned from this dimension.

Overall, the consensus-based governing coalition is the right move at the right time. But despite having come close to the long-overdue "big bang" before, only to be disappointed by the fizzle, the renewed optimism is justified.