

**NETANYAHU'S "BIG BANG": FORMATION OF UNITY GOV'T A
"GENUINE OPPORTUNITY" FOR REFORM**

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Isranet Daily Briefing, May 10, 2012

<https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/netanyahus-big-bang-formation-unity-govt-genuine-opportunity-reform/>

OUT OF SELF-INTEREST, GENUINE OPPORTUNITY

David Horovitz

Times of Israel, May 8, 2012

The cynicism that greeted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition agreement with Kadima's Shaul Mofaz Tuesday is easily understood. Mofaz has made a gold-medal-worthy sprint from bitter foe to warm ally of the prime minister. One minute he was calling Netanyahu a liar and vowing never to negotiate with him. The next, they were Best Friends Forever, or at least until Netanyahu tires of him....

Most of the analysts' criticism has been heaped on Mofaz. Netanyahu achieved stability at almost no price—a single ministerial position for Mofaz when, three years ago, a partnership with Tzipi Livni's...Kadima would have cost him half the seats at the cabinet table. Netanyahu brought 28 more seats into his coalition, but won't have to compromise his agenda in the slightest to Kadima's (insofar as it has one). He was able to stave off a confrontation with Likud hardliners over the composition of a Knesset slate for elections he never wanted. A win-win-win for him.

Mofaz, however, sold Kadima "like a stall-holder in *Mahane Yehuda* (vegetable market) minutes before Sabbath-eve closing time," declared *Channel 2's* political analyst Amit Segal. "It's a complete capitulation.... The end for Mofaz.... The beginning of the end for Kadima." Segal may well be right about that. If the great big new coalition achieves anything, it is the prime minister who will reap the political benefits when Israel does go to the polls next year. If all we see is 18 months of immobility...Mofaz will get the blame.

And yet the Netanyahu-Mofaz partnership really could produce change, if its protagonists follow through on their fine rhetoric.

It is hard to believe the alliance will have any great effect on peacemaking with the Palestinians, notwithstanding Tuesday's appeals by both men to the Palestinian Authority to return to the negotiating table.... Likewise, Mofaz's presence at the cabinet table will have no impact on policy regarding Iran. If Netanyahu believes the Jewish State

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faces imminent annihilation, he will act. Until then, he won't. Period.

And while Mofaz has made a transparently expedient attempt to recast himself as a champion of social justice, Kadima's coalition presence is not going to spark a radical remake of government economic policy. Mass social protest might do that. Moaning from Mofaz will not.

Where promised electoral reform is concerned, however, progress in the next 18 months is conceivable—hard to believe, but not impossible. Netanyahu and Mofaz could take advantage of the new, rare marginalization of the smaller parties to change the system. The public wants a more accountable process for electing and rejecting its leaders; the politicians want a more manageable one.

But perhaps the greatest opportunity for real change with this new coalition is over legislation to require national service for all—notably including the ultra-Orthodox community. The national consensus is that the current situation—where a substantial part of the Jewish demographic is subsidized by the rest; where the burden of protecting the country is unfairly distributed; and where the norm of a mass of Jewish scholars studying rather than working full-time represents a stark departure from authentic Orthodoxy—is untenable and must change.

Here is an issue with wide public resonance. Here is an issue vital to Israel's economic and security well-being. Here is an issue where reform is most emphatically in both the national interest and the narrow interest of our two new leaders. Here is an issue where progress would utterly silence the cynics.

REFORM TIME

Editorial

Jerusalem Post, May 8, 2012

At a press conference to announce their coalition agreement, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and incoming Vice Premier Shaul Mofaz articulated four central goals. They plan to pass legislation that will obligate ultra-Orthodox yeshiva student to perform military or national

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service; they hope to pass a two-year fiscal budget; they want to advance "responsible" peace negotiations with the Palestinians. The two men also vowed to advance electoral reform aimed at fostering political stability.

The incorporation of Kadima to create the broadest coalition government in Israeli history, with 94 MKs, presents a unique opportunity. As early as October 1948, just months after the creation of the state, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, called to change the electoral system. About 10 bills calling for regional elections were presented to the Knesset between 1958 and 1988. However, all such attempts at reform were torpedoed by small parties that were members of consecutive government coalitions—especially religious parties that stood to lose the most.

These parties presently take advantage of the fundamental instability and chronic divisions that characterize our extreme proportional representation government, with its relatively low 2-percent threshold for election to the Knesset.... These sorts of governments tend to encourage the creation of political parties—such as the Pensioners Party, religious parties or Shinui—with radical or narrow agendas that represent only a fraction of the population or have fleeting popularity. Government coalitions are created by pulling together a patchwork of diverse factions. These governments are plagued with divisions and instability. In many cases, a single party can bring down a government, giving it inordinate leveraging power....

It should come as no surprise that the average duration of Israeli governments between 2000 and 2009 was less than three years, much shorter than the world average. This has very bad ramifications for long-term government planning.... Now with a large, stable coalition, Netanyahu and Mofaz can act where previous political leaders failed....

The benefits of regional elections, at least for some of the Knesset's seats, are clear. Leaders with strong grassroots backing, chosen for their unique talents, pragmatism and ability to get things done, will be brought into politics. These men and women will be obligated to represent their constituency, not the party hacks.

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Raising the threshold is another important step that should be taken. Until 1996, the two largest political parties combined consistently had more than 70 Knesset seats. Since 1999, the two largest political parties have had fewer than half the seats in the Knesset....

Another reform that should be considered is increasing the number of Knesset seats. According to data presented by the *Israel Democracy Institute*, the ratio of MKs to citizens in Israel is one to 59,000, higher than in any comparatively sized European country.

The unprecedented size of the new government coalition and its consequent stability provides a unique opportunity to institute much-needed electoral reforms. We hope that Netanyahu and Mofaz will take advantage of this situation to help ensure that future governments enjoy similar stability.

UNITY GOV'T—OPPORTUNITIES AND DANGERS

Isi Leibler

Jerusalem Post, May 8, 2012

The dramatic coup by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and opposition leader Shaul Mofaz in forming a national unity government and setting aside elections until October 2013 has dazzled the nation.... In truth, beyond personalities and ambitions, there was no ideological obstacle preventing the Likud and Kadima, both essentially pragmatic (and opportunistic) centrist political parties, from forming a unity bloc....

The vast majority of Israelis will undoubtedly welcome this move which, if managed effectively, could finally overcome the great divide which has so hurt the nation since the era of the Oslo Accords. The creation of a centrist government of 94 lawmakers also provides the possibility to tackle a host of major political, social and identity issues that were relegated to the back burner because of the excessive veto power of small hardline or one-dimensional parties which have until now controlled the balance of power in the Knesset.

It could make Netanyahu one of the most powerful prime ministers Israel

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has ever had.... It will also immensely improve his global standing and relationship with [US] President Barack Obama and the Americans in relation to the Iranian threat and Palestinian intransigency.

But Netanyahu is also taking an enormous risk. He was a virtual certainty to win the election, but if he mishandles this unity move, or due to time limitations fails to convince Israelis that the new government is determined to reform the system, this move could represent an end to his flourishing political career. It will require major legislation within nine to 12 months—a daunting but certainly not impossible challenge.

For Kadima and its leader Shaul Mofaz it represents a reprieve, because the party would have collapsed in an election, which explains its lack of concern for cabinet portfolios. Up to two-thirds of the sitting Kadima MKs would have been sent home if elections took place in September. Mofaz now has the opportunity—if he performs well—to regain the support of the electorate or to ultimately merge with the Likud.

The other beneficiary is Labor Party leader Shelly Yacimovich, who now emerges as a genuine leader of the opposition and may concentrate on social and economic issues, and possibly at a later stage still join the government.

In my opinion there are five crucial issues which Netanyahu and Mofaz must overcome if they are to win over the public.

- The first could be the most crucial, because it will set the tone for the new government: to restore the concept of cabinet responsibility.

The worst manifestations of dysfunctionality in recent Israeli governments were the tendency of individual ministers and coalition parties to act as though they represented independent fiefdoms rather than being responsible members of government. Netanyahu must ensure that once the government adopts a position, any minister who feels obliged to make a critical statement must resign.

- The second issue, which seems to have been agreed upon in advance, is to introduce the long overdue and desperately needed electoral reform designed to stabilize the government and to weaken the power of

splinter groups to veto the will of the people.

- The third issue, also apparently agreed upon in principle, will undoubtedly prove to be the most challenging: the desperate need to review issues of religion and state, which could never previously be dealt with rationally, due to the opposition of the haredi parties controlling the balance of power.

The replacement for the "Tal Law" and the introduction of a form of national service for all Israeli citizens—Arabs as well as haredim—must be implemented if the national rage and bitterness generated by the burgeoning draft exemptions is to be overcome.

There are other religious issues such as the role of the Chief Rabbinate and the rabbinical courts in relation to marriage and conversions, and the imperative of ensuring that future generations of ultra-Orthodox Israelis are equipped with the education required to enable them to earn a livelihood and not remain lifelong recipients of welfare.

This will require courage on the part of both Netanyahu and Mofaz, both of whom seek to nurture the political support of the religious parties. If they merely introduce cosmetic reforms it will lead to a massive backlash at the next elections and provide strength for opposition parties.

- Fourth, the government must continue along the path of economic reform, especially as the European economic meltdown is likely to affect Israel over the next 12 months. The main focus should be to continue breaking the excessive control of a few large groups which inhibit competition in the market.
- Finally, there is a need to initiate an ongoing review of the education system which currently encourages tribalization of society in lieu of cementing national unity. Whilst the haredi and Arab sectors require considerable autonomy, it is imperative that in the long term all streams be obliged to implement a core curriculum which incorporates minimum standards for secular subjects and in which an atmosphere of national volunteerism is nurtured.

Theoretically, these objectives could all be achieved in a limited time and

would enjoy the enthusiastic support of most Israelis....

NO IRAN DISSENSION WITHIN ISRAELI COALITION

Jonathan S. Tobin

Contentions, May 9, 2012

With the dust settling from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's brilliant political maneuver in which he vastly expanded his coalition and his power, the question remains what will he do with it in the next year? While Israelis seem more interested in domestic political implications of the move, not surprisingly, most foreign observers are focused on the impact of the new coalition on the issue of Iran's nuclear threat. Some of Netanyahu's frustrated critics are holding on to the hope that somehow the addition of Kadima head Shaul Mofaz will moderate the prime minister's stand on the issue. But this is not only a misreading of Mofaz but of Netanyahu's position.

As the prime minister demonstrated [yesterday] in his meeting with European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, far from Mofaz's entry into the Cabinet acting as a restraint on him, the creation of a government that can count on nearly 80 percent of the Knesset means that when Netanyahu speaks now there can be no doubt that he represents a strong consensus within his country on the issue. By bringing Mofaz as well as Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman to speak to Ashton, Netanyahu demonstrated that there is across-the-board support for his demands that Iran's nuclear program be stopped dead in its tracks.

Ashton, a virulent critic of Israel who has been ceded control of the P5+1 talks with Iran by President Obama, may have intended her visit to Israel as an opportunity to mend fences so as to allow her to continue the diplomatic minuet she is dancing with the Islamist regime to continue unimpeded by Israeli actions. But Netanyahu used the meeting to lay down the guidelines for the upcoming negotiations in Baghdad. As *Haaretz* reported:

"During the meeting, the Israelis presented a rigid set of demands for

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the Iranians.... Netanyahu and the three ministers told Ashton that Israel's position leading up to the Baghdad talks is that the talks will be considered as progress only if they would yield an Iranian guarantee—with a clear timetable—to halt uranium enrichment, to remove all enriched uranium out of Iranian soil, and to dismantle the underground enrichment facility in Fordo, which is near Qom."

In doing so, Netanyahu is attempting to box in the Western negotiators who have given every indication that they will be happy to allow the Iranians to drag out the talks and would be satisfied with a deal that would leave their nuclear program intact. These terms were delivered to Ashton, but the real audience for Israel's position is in Washington.

Three years ago, President Obama may have entertained hopes about toppling Netanyahu, but now he is faced with the fact that the Israeli is stronger than ever. Though fears about a unilateral Israeli strike on Iran are probably exaggerated—Netanyahu would almost certainly not contemplate such an option while Western talks with Iran are ongoing—the new coalition will force the administration to stop listening to dissident Israeli voices carping at Netanyahu for his tough stance on Iran.

As *Haaretz* also notes, the idea that Mofaz disagrees with the prime minister on Iran is a misperception fueled by Israeli political maneuvering: "According to a report published by Israeli newspaper *Maariv* on Wednesday, several officials who took part in the coalitional negotiations between Mofaz and Netanyahu said the two are 'coordinated' over the issue of Iran and are 'of one mind' when it comes to stopping Iran's nuclear program."

Netanyahu knows Iran has no intention of giving up its nuclear chips in the current talks. He now has a broad government that will back him on any decision to take action. That places more pressure than ever on Obama not to allow the U.S. to be dragged into an unsatisfactory deal by Ashton that will have negative political repercussions at home and might force Israel to act on its own. Though the president may hope to kick the Iranian can down the road until after the fall U.S. elections, Netanyahu's coup may have made it more difficult for the president to do so.