By Jan Kapusnak [i]

Israel's next parliamentary election is set for 27 October 2026 – and if it happens on schedule, the Knesset will complete a full four-year term for the first time since 1992–96, after decades of early dissolutions and a political crisis of five elections in less than four years. But this durability is not stability; it is Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu's political survival. Remaining in office helps him fight corruption charges and defer a full reckoning for October 7, 2023, Israel's gravest security failure, while sustaining a corrupt coalition kept together through sweeping concessions to far-right and ultra-Orthodox partners even as the country fights an existential war.

Public sentiment points the other way: polls show most Israelis would have preferred early elections, making October 2026 a delayed verdict on wartime leadership. It will again be "Bibi vs. anti-Bibi," but also a referendum on Israel's democracy – whether Netanyahu's bloc further weakens institutional checks and balances, and whether the state authorizes a serious independent inquiry into the failures of October 7.

At the center of the pro-Bibi camp stands Netanyahu's Likud, a right-wing nationalist-conservative party. Even after years of failed Gaza policy – built on the assumption that Hamas could be "managed" through deterrence and Qatari cash – culminating in the October 7 massacre, Netanyahu still presents Likud and himself as Israel's only credible security guarantor, while claiming credit for weakening Iran and its regional axis, including Hamas in Gaza. Economically, Likud favors the free market with targeted social support. Institutionally, Likud has radically shifted from a liberal tradition of defending judicial independence to a populist, leader-centric posture – attacking "elites" in the media, the military and security services, and the courts, and invoking a hostile "deep state".

Despite personal rivalries, Netanyahu's key allies remain two far-right parties: Religious Zionism (Bezalel Smotrich) and Otzma Yehudit (Itamar Ben-Gvir). Both push settlement expansion, Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank and Gaza, weaker judicial constraints, tighter political control over the police, and a tougher line toward Arabs and anything they label as the "left."

The bloc is completed by the ultra-Orthodox parties Shas (Aryeh Deri) and United Torah Judaism (Yitzhak Goldknopf, Moshe Gafni), focused on preserving the religion–state "status quo" (legal rabbinical control over marriage/divorce,

conversion and Jewish status), securing budgets, and maintaining draft exemptions.

The anti-Netanyahu bloc is broad but chronically fragmented, spanning the secular right to the liberal center-left. Its former flagship, Benny Gantz's Blue and White, was built on his ex–IDF chief of staff credentials and a promise of responsible governance, but his decision to join Netanyahu in 2020 and again after October 7 blurred the line between opposition and coalition, eroding his credibility as an alternative. The party was further weakened when senior figures, including ex–IDF chief Gadi Eisenkot, left; Eisenkot went on to launch Yashar, a centrist "repair and healing" list aimed at rebuilding public trust and offering a governing alternative.

The bloc's secular-center anchor is Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid, which campaigns on civil equality, limiting religious imposition, defending a free press, and protecting democratic checks and balances. Lapid has also been Netanyahu's most consistent parliamentary antagonist, positioning himself as the clearest institutional alternative to the ruling camp. To Lapid's right sits Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, hawkish on security but defined domestically by its fight against ultra-Orthodox exemptions and rabbinical power, insisting on an "equal burden" – above all universal conscription and workforce participation. On the left, Yair Golan's Democrats frame the election as a last-ditch struggle for liberal democracy and minority rights

Hovering over the entire opposition map is the return of Naftali Bennett. Long identified with the pro-Netanyahu right, Bennett broke ranks in 2021 to join the "change" coalition and became prime minister despite commanding only a small Knesset faction, with Yair Lapid as alternate prime minister under their rotation agreement. That government also made history by relying on Ra'am, an Arab Islamist party, as a coalition partner – an unprecedented step in Israeli politics. The experiment ultimately collapsed in 2022. Bennett's comeback now reshapes the opposition landscape by offering a security-minded, managerial alternative for voters exhausted by Netanyahu yet unconvinced by the old anti-Netanyahu leadership.

In Israel's parliamentary system, no one becomes prime minister by winning the most votes. Power goes to whoever can stitch together a coalition commanding at least 61 of the Knesset's 120 seats.

January 2026 polling points to a familiar destination: deadlock. Likud remains the largest party at roughly 25 seats, yet the pro-Netanyahu bloc totals only 50–52; the

anti-Netanyahu bloc edges ahead on paper at around 56–58 – still short of 61 and with virtually no prospect of cross-bloc defections, as political dogmatism has locked parties into two mutually hostile camps and electoral bargaining/shifts now happens mostly within blocs, not between them.

That is why the race has narrowed to three plausible prime ministers – Netanyahu, Lapid, and Bennett – and why a stalemate could again leave Netanyahu in office even after the elections, heading an interim government through successive rounds of voting until one side finds a way to break through.

Lapid remains the opposition's most consistent institutional challenger, but the real surprise is Bennett's comeback: his new list (Bennett 2026) polls around 21 seats, making him the strongest opposition force and the election's key wildcard. But a chunk of that support may be "parking" by undecided voters rather than a stable bloc – meaning those numbers could shrink as October approaches. Crucially, Bennett's path to actually becoming prime minister is constrained by coalition arithmetic: a Bennett-led government is feasible with some form of Arab-party partnership – either Arab parties inside the coalition or external support.

Despite having governed with Ra'am last time, Bennett now says he will not govern with Arab backing, and key partners draw similar red lines – Lieberman, for instance, rejects cooperation with "non-Zionist" Arab parties. Even if figures such as Eisenkot and Golan are more open in principle, that is still not enough to produce a workable majority, so Bennett's path to the premiership runs into a wall. After October 7, much of the Jewish public has hardened against formal reliance on Arab parties, leaving them potentially numerically pivotal yet politically toxic – and leaving the country trapped, once again, in a stalemate that rewards the incumbent.

Beyond personalities and blocs, the vote will hinge on several core topics: security and accountability (the future of Gaza and whether to launch a serious, independent October 7 probe); democracy and corruption (the coalition's drive to curb the Supreme Court and weaken oversight versus an opposition pledging to defend judicial checks and a free press); burden-sharing (end Haredi draft exemptions); and economic recovery (a rising cost of living, rebuilding southern and northern Israel, and budgets strained by prolonged war).

In foreign policy, a change of government would likely bring more change in style than in strategy. On core security files – Hamas, Iran, Hezbollah, and the U.S.

alliance – there is broad continuity across most Zionist parties. The main shifts would likely appear in two areas: West Bank policy, with fewer annexationist signals and a slower settlement push if Smotrich and Ben-Gvir lose leverage; and regional diplomacy, with more pragmatic engagement with Arab partners, Washington, and Europe – especially on shaping Gaza's "day after."

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