On Sunday, November 8, Israeli President Isaac Herzog will announce whom he will task first with forming a new government. It is almost certain that this will not be incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but rather his main challenger, former Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot. However, it remains entirely unclear at this point how Eisenkot intends to form a government capable of governing.

By Sacha Wigdorovits

In the parliamentary elections held on Tuesday, October 27, neither the current governing coalition led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor the opposition led by Gadi Eisenkot secured the 61 seats needed for a majority in the 120-member Knesset. Netanyahu's bloc won 53 seats, while Eisenkot's bloc won 48.

Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that President Isaac Herzog will task Netanyahu with forming a new government; instead, he will likely task Eisenkot, who lost to the opposition by five seats.

Arab parties want Eisenkot as the new prime minister

The reason for this is the four Arab parties, three of which had joined forces to form a joint list for the elections, while a fourth ran independently. With a total of 19 seats—11 for the joint three-party list and eight for the party "Ra'am," which ran independently—the Arab parties were the true winners of the Israeli parliamentary elections.

In the subsequent traditional exploratory talks with the Israeli president, all four Arab party leaders stated that they would like to see a government led by Gadi Eisenkot. This would mean that Eisenkot could count on the support of a total of 67 members of the Knesset—in other words, a majority.

Little Integration of Arab Parties into the Government

However, it is unlikely that the Arab parties will formally join an Eisenkot government. This is because both Eisenkot himself and all other opposition leaders

ruled out such a move before the elections—with the exception of Social Democratic Party leader Yair Golan.

The integration of an Arab party into the new government seemed most feasible in the case of “Ra’am.” Although it is an Islamist party, it had already been part of a governing coalition in 2021. In addition, in the current elections, it placed a prominent Jewish Zionist second on its ticket: Yoav Segalovitz, a former police commander and deputy minister of public security.

Criticism of “Ra’am” Party Leader Mansour Abbas

However, during his current exploratory talks with President Herzog, “Ra’am” party leader Mansour Abbas refused to designate Hamas as a terrorist organization, citing a possible attack on his family. That said, he had previously strongly condemned the terrorist attack carried out by Hamas on October 7, 2023, and called for the disarmament of Hamas.

Nevertheless, Abbas is now being criticized for his refusal to designate Hamas as a terrorist organization, and this could definitely prevent his party from being accepted as a coalition partner by the opposition.

Minority Government or Partnership with the Ultra-Orthodox

Eisenkot would therefore have to steer the fate of the Jewish state in the future with a minority government supported by the Arab parties. But whether this will happen is uncertain. There is currently speculation in Israel that his electoral coalition partner, Avigdor Lieberman, could throw a wrench in his plans.

Lieberman, the leader of the nationalist party “Yisrael Beiteinu” (Our Home in Israel), rejects any cooperation with Arab parties. Instead, he appears to be considering an alliance with the ultra-Orthodox party coalition “United Torah Judaism (UTJ)” and with the Shas party, which is also ultra-Orthodox. Both have supported Benjamin Netanyahu in the past.

Together, UTJ (7) and Shas (6) hold 13 seats in the newly elected Knesset. This would give the coalition led by Gadi Eisenkot a narrow majority of 61 seats in

parliament. The UTJ leadership has also hinted that it does not necessarily feel obligated to continue cooperating with Netanyahu. Shas is remaining silent on the matter, likely for tactical reasons related to the negotiations.

Mandatory military service for Haredim as a difficult sticking point

However, the scenario in which the current opposition comes to power with the support of the ultra-Orthodox parties is highly unlikely. This is because during the election campaign, all opposition leaders unequivocally spoke out in favor of universal conscription for ultra-Orthodox Jews (Haredim). Along with the investigation into the terrorist attack of October 7, 2023, this was the central issue of the current Knesset elections.

Until now, the Haredim have benefited from the fact that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government circumvented a Supreme Court ruling requiring them to be drafted into military or civilian service just like the rest of the population. It is out of the question that a new government under Gadi Eisenkot would waive this requirement.

It is therefore unclear how Lieberman—who is himself a staunch advocate of mandatory military service for the Haredim—intends to persuade the ultra-Orthodox parties to join a governing coalition led by Gadi Eisenkot.

What the future Israeli government will look like is therefore completely up in the air at this point.

About the Author: Sacha Wigdorovits is president of the Fokus Israel und Nahost association, which operates the website fokusisrael.ch. He studied history, German language and literature, and social psychology at the University of Zurich and has worked, among other roles, as a U.S. correspondent for the SonntagsZeitung, served as editor-in-chief of BLICK, and co-founded the commuter newspaper 20minuten.