Summary:

- Israel has not yet formally entered an election campaign, but politically the campaign has already begun.
- On May 20, the Knesset approved in a preliminary reading a bill to dissolve itself, with all 110 (of 120) lawmakers who participated in the vote supporting it.
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was absent, reportedly because of security consultations.
- The vote does not yet dissolve parliament: the bill must still pass through committee and three further readings.
- But it marks the clearest sign so far that the current coalition has reached the end of its political life.
- Elections have to be held not later than October 27, 2026.
- It will be an election of reckoning for the Israeli voters to sanction the current government for its failure to prevent the massacre of October 7, 2023 and its politics since then.

By Jan Kapusnak

The immediate trigger is the long-running dispute over ultra-Orthodox military service – an issue that has haunted Israeli politics for decades. Netanyahu’s Haredi partners have lost patience with the failure to pass legislation codifying and extending exemptions for yeshiva students. What was once a recurring but manageable coalition crisis has now become an election detonator. Since October 7, 2023 the issue has become far more explosive: hundreds of thousands of Israelis have served in uniform or reserves, many have been killed, and the old exemption system appears increasingly indefensible to much of the public.

Under Israeli law, the Knesset can dissolve itself only by passing a dissolution bill in the required readings, with the final vote needing the support of at least 61

Members of Knesset. Until that happens, Netanyahu still has room to maneuver. The fact that this is now a government-backed bill also matters: it gives the coalition greater control over the legislative timetable and over the eventual election date than an opposition-sponsored bill would have done.

The question now is less whether Israel will vote than when. Elections must be held by October 27, 2026 at the latest, but if the dissolution bill passes, they could be brought forward, possibly to September. The exact date matters politically. Whenever Israelis vote, the campaign is likely to become a referendum on October 7, the war, the Haredi draft issue and Netanyahu’s leadership. An earlier election would leave Netanyahu less time to reshape the political narrative; a later one would give him several more weeks to present himself as the only leader able to manage Israel’s wars and international pressure.

Polls indicate that Israeli voters want a change

The possible outcome is uncertain, but the trend is not favorable to the current coalition. A recent Maariv poll found that 55 percent of Israelis prefer Netanyahu not to run again and retire from politics. The same poll placed the coalition bloc at only 49 seats, while the current opposition, excluding Arab parties, reached 61. Polls are not elections, and Israeli campaigns often change quickly. But the right-wing-religious coalition that won a majority in 2022 no longer appears assured of one.

The opposition’s main advantage is that it can frame the election as a national reconstruction vote. Former prime minister Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid have joined forces under the “Together” list. They present themselves as a broad centrist alternative able to unite right and center, religious and secular, around institutional repair, Haredi enlistment and post-October 7 rebuilding. But they must still persuade voters that their partnership is more than an anti-Netanyahu arrangement.

Netanyahu’s path is narrower but not closed. Likud remains a powerful political machine, his core electorate remains loyal, and the opposition still faces the familiar Israeli challenge of translating anti-Netanyahu sentiment into a coherent governing majority. Even if elections are called, Netanyahu would remain prime minister during the transition period, and he could survive politically if his opponents fail to form a stable coalition afterward.

The haredi draft exemption has become a toxic issue for Netanyahu

This is where the Haredi parties become the paradox of the campaign. Their revolt helped bring the government to the brink, yet they may still be essential to Netanyahu’s hopes of returning to power. At the same time, the draft issue has become far more toxic since the war began. Any future government will face the same contradiction: Israel needs soldiers, but its political system has long depended on parties whose power rests on preserving exemptions and converting coalition leverage into sectoral privileges.

The dissolution of the Knesset marks the collapse of the post-2022 coalition formula under the weight of war, public anger, assaults on democratic institutions and the unresolved Haredi draft question. The coming election will not only decide who forms the next government. It will test whether Israeli politics can move from survival mode to reconstruction.

For Netanyahu, the campaign will be another fight for political survival – a familiar pattern since Israel entered its cycle of repeated elections in 2019, but now under the far heavier shadow of October 7. For the opposition, it is a chance to transform anger into a governing majority. For Israel, it is another election born of crisis, but perhaps also the first real test of whether the country can build a new political order after the catastrophe.

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