Israel Elections: Only voting for Gantz-Sa'ar-Eisenkot can end the cycle - opinion

Only a vote for the list led by Benny Gantz, Gideon Sa'ar and Gadi Eisenkot offers a reasonable prospect to end Israel's political predicament.

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As we Israelis are called to the polls for the fifth time in three years, two questions beg an answer: a. How did we get into this loop? b. How do we get out of it?

The answer to the first question is simple: since 2019, the right in Israel has had a majority, but Benjamin Netanyahu has not. With a different leader at its helm, Likud would easily have formed a government after each of the four previous consecutive elections. As long as Netanyahu refuses to step down, or alternatively as long as Netanyahu's right-wing nemeses deny him a majority, the deadlock will continue.

Blaming Israel's political system misses the mark because this very system did not produce sequential snap elections between 1949 and 2019. Netanyahu is the one who brought down, in 2014, the government imposed on him by Yair Lapid and by Naftali Bennett. It was a government that had excluded the Orthodox parties to the satisfaction of the secularist Avigdor Liberman, whose party had run on a joint slate with Likud in 2013 with the promise of a full merger after the elections.

Netanyahu reneged on that promise and gambled instead on a snap election to revert to his Orthodox allies. He emerged from the 2015 election with a razor-thin majority of 61 MKs (out of 120).

Because a 61 majority constitutes a logistical headache (all majority MKs must be present for every vote) and a recipe for extortion (any majority backbencher can blackmail the PM) Netanyahu decided to widen his coalition. Given a choice between forming a national unity government with Labor (then headed by Isaac Herzog) and bringing Liberman back in from the cold, Netanyahu chose the latter. Liberman, however, eventually quit. Rather than reverting to his 61 majority, Netanyahu called a snap election once again.

THIS TIME, his gamble failed. After the April 2019 election, only 60 MKs supported Netanyahu. He kept spinning the wheel, but to no avail: 55 MKs after the September 2019 election, 58 after the March 2020 election. Israel was heading to a fourth election, but the pandemic convinced Benny Gantz to end his alliance with Lapid and form an emergency government with Netanyahu. Yet Netanyahu threw this lifeline away and brought the government down by blocking the budget.

Netanyahu had been indicted in January 2020 for breach of trust, bribery and fraud. He decided to bet again on a better electoral outcome to postpone his trial with tailor-made legislation. According to polls, Netanyahu's gamble would have paid off this time. It did not, thanks to Gideon Sa'ar's decision to quit Likud in December 2020, form his own party, and rescue Israel from Netanyahu's cynical and self-serving grip.

Sa'ar's risky and courageous move is what ended the deadlock, but Netanyahu eventually brought down the coalition that had pushed him aside. Netanyahu now aspires to what he rejected in the past: a razor-thin majority with extremists. While previously cautious and responsible, Netanyahu has become reckless and unbound.

His actions in the past three years prove that he is now willing to sacrifice the national interest to extract himself from his trial. If he obtains 61 MKs with his allies, he will advance tailor-made legislation, subdue the judiciary to the executive, and complete his control of the media. Israel would then become similar to the semi-authoritarian regime of Viktor Orban in Hungary.

The only way to prevent this dire but likely scenario is to deny Netanyahu a 61 majority. Then, and only then, might there be a way out of the election loop with three possible scenarios: 1. A unity government between Gantz and Netanyahu, with Gantz being given the first stint as PM in a rotation agreement 2. A Likud mutiny forcing Netanyahu to step down 3. Defections within the ranks of

Likud and the Orthodox parties, thus enabling Gantz to form a coalition without Likud.

The likeliness of each scenario is admittedly debatable. But only a fifth failure by Netanyahu to gather 61 MKs might produce a way out of the political crisis that has plagued Israel since 2019. Unlike Gantz, Lapid will neither join a coalition with a restrained Netanyahu nor convince the Orthodox to break ranks. This is why only a vote for the list led by Gantz, Sa'ar and Gadi Eisenkot offers a reasonable prospect to end Israel's political predicament.

The writer is an author, university lecturer and consultant.