

Israel: Fifth Time Luck for Netanyahu

by GWYNNE DYER

'When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully,' wrote Sam Johnson 250 years ago, and the Israeli prime minister has just confirmed it.

Prime Minister Binyamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu has put Israel through five elections in four years in order to come up with a coalition government that will not abandon him to the tender mercies of the courts. He is on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust, and the evidence against him is strong. The bribery charge alone could get him ten years in jail.

But now he is saved from all that, because his new government will be sworn in this week. Serving prime ministers don't go to jail, and his new coalition will probably last long enough to change the laws and give him permanent immunity.

In effect, each of the five elections has been a referendum on Bibi's fitness to rule ? and each one showed Israeli voters to be equally divided with almost mathematical precision on that question.

The roller-coaster ride started in 2019, when Netanyahu had already been in power for ten years. His existing coalition fell apart when the corruption charges were made public, but there was an election due anyway. That would mean a wholesale reshuffle of the parties and many new coalition possibilities, so he went with it. His Likud party emerged from that election as the biggest party, but the new coalition he created also fell apart. Try again.

Same result for 2019's second election: Bibi managed to form a coalition ranging right across the political spectrum, but it fell apart within the year.

It was becoming clear that Bibi himself was the problem. A growing majority of Israeli voters are right-wing, but a lot of them don't trust him personally. Try again.

Third election, December 2020 (and Netanyahu's trial was actually underway by now, though at a snail's pace).

Likud was the biggest single party again, but a wildly disparate group of parties united only by their dislike of Bibi formed a coalition without him, and was confirmed by a fourth election in March, 2021.

Do try to keep up. There will be a test.

Out of office, Netanyahu busied himself with brokering an electoral merger between three small extreme right-wing parties that separately stood little chance of winning seats in the Knesset by themselves. (An Israeli party has to win 3.25% of the national vote to be seated in parliament at all.) Together on a single ticket, however, they could win a few seats.

Sixteen months rolled by and the anti-Bibi coalition predictably splintered, because they had almost nothing else in common. A fifth election was called, and when it was held two months ago Netanyahu's new creation, the Religious Zionist Party, won fourteen seats.

That made it possible for the first time for Netanyahu to build a coalition government that is stable, because it contains only right-wing parties. It took five elections and a lot of everybody else's time, but he is a master politician.

The new Religious Zionist Party (RZP) is so extreme that most foreigners and many Israelis are shocked. Outgoing Prime Minister Yair Lapid describes it as 'full-on crazy', and former Bill Clinton adviser Daniel Seidemann, an Israeli, talks of 'Israel's inexorable descent into totalitarianism and racism.'

That may be a bit overwrought, but the leaders of the RZP are definitely beyond the pale.

Deputy leader Itamar Ben-Gvir is a gun-brandishing street agitator who has been indicted 50 times for racist incitement. He was a fan of far-right Jewish terrorist Rabbi Meir Kahane, and became famous as a teenager for stealing the hood ornament of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's car.

He told the reporters: 'We'll get to him too.' (Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist three weeks later.)

Ben-Gvir's colleague, RZP chairman Bezalel Smotrich, believes that Israel should annex the occupied Palestinian territories, and calls for Palestinians who throw stones to be shot by police. Last year he told an Arab Member of the Knesset: 'It's a mistake that Ben-Gurion didn't finish the job and throw you out in 1948.'

Both men are settlers living in the West Bank, and they want cabinet posts that give them power over what happens there ? like legalising Jewish settlements that are illegal even under Israeli law.

Bibi will swallow all of that and more, because they will enable him to pass laws that give the Knesset power to override court decisions. (Judges: 'Guilty as charged.' Knesset: 'No, he's not.')

The West Bank Palestinians are already in a slow-motion revolt: 150 killed by the Israeli army and Jewish settlers this year (and 31 Israeli dead).

The new government's response will be much too big and brutal, and the West Bank is already awash with arms. It's heading for war, or at least massacre.