INDEPENDENT

Voices

COMMENT

# I fear Israel isn't finished with Benjamin Netanyahu

Less than a fortnight away from the Israeli general election, the embattled prime minister is slipping behind in the polls, but he could yet hold on to power - which is why **Yaniv Korman** will join an estimated 50,000 expats who are flying home just to cast a vote

**Yaniv Korman**

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In a few days, Israel will hold its most consequential election in a generation. Since most citizens are not permitted to vote from abroad, I will join an estimated 50,000 expats and fly back to the Motherland just to cast my vote.

Many of us share the fear that Benjamin Netanyahu - a man who, over 19 years, has somehow served five terms, making him Israel's longest-serving prime minister - will find a way to stay in power, against the odds.

According to opinion polls, Gadi Eisenkot, the former IDF chief of staff who now leads the centrist political party Yashar, is ahead of Netanyahu's right-wing Likud. Were the election to be held today, Yashar would likely win 26 seats to Likud's 20.

But even if the current coalition - which elevated some of the most extreme, ultra-nationalist figures in Israeli politics into key roles - fails to reach the 61 seats needed for a majority in the 120-seat parliament, the opposition parties may still struggle to assemble an administration that can govern.

Netanyahu - who was in power during the deadliest attack in Israel's history, on October 7, 2023, a failing of grotesque proportions that has yet to be tested at the ballot box - is also on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust, charges that he denies.

And yet it is entirely possible that Netanyahu has a chance of staying in power. If no alternative government can be formed, he remains as caretaker PM. And he has a phenomenal gift for turning events to his political advantage.

Last month, he delivered a confident, confrontational speech at the UN General Assembly to defend Israel's missile strikes against Gaza, Iran and beyond as a matter of national security. It demonstrated to the world how, against all the odds - as well in defiance of the findings of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry, which concluded that, on his watch, Israel committed war crimes and acts of genocide - he is still in power.

Before he could begin, when dozens of delegates walked out in protest, he turned it into a taunt, telling any other "moral cowards" still in the hall to follow them.

Netanyahu described the settler violence in the occupied West Bank as the work of "a handful of juvenile delinquents" who throw stones, chop down olive trees and light the occasional fire - a grotesque characterisation of the takeover of far-right violence. He said he opposed vigilantism and had instructed Israel's domestic security service to act. But, he claimed, the problem was exaggerated: only "maybe two or three" Palestinians had been killed.

My friend Layla, who lives in the West Bank, describes a very different picture. "Since October 7th, settlers have been terrorising us," she says. "They come in packs, shirts over their faces, wearing tallit [a fringed prayer shawl] or are bare-chested, batons and slingshots in their hands. They steal sheep and put houses to flame. They shoot children, and the IDF just stands by."

Netanyahu understands instinctively how people are moved by personal stories more than high-brow or abstract arguments - so, addressing the UN, he also spoke about his brother Yoni, who died in the Entebbe operation, the IDF's hostage rescue mission in 1976.



‘Those of us who have the privilege to do something about Netanyahu’s government have a moral obligation to use our votes before Israel’s democracy dissolves further’ (Getty)

But his big chance to move from behind in the polls came a couple of days later when a terrorist attempted to attack a routine flight from Dubai to Tel Aviv. When the passengers landed at Ben Gurion, he was there to meet Yaniv Hayoun, one of the passengers who had helped regain control of the plane. He called the man in the blood-stained T-shirt a hero and a “lion”, and his office circulated images of the encounter.

Hayoun has become an unwitting poster boy for Netanyahu’s re-election campaign, giving the prime minister a powerful image that is easier to cheer for than the complicated reality.

Netanyahu has since warned that Hamas may try to influence the election with more attacks. I do not dismiss those dangers. But I worry that, rather than make his supporters question the prime minister’s record - October 7 was a security services failure for which he has yet to be held accountable - they reinforce the belief that only Netanyahu can protect them.

What also worries me is that many Israelis simply aren't engaging with the general election, and the need for change.

The last person to be judicially executed in Israel was Nazi official Adolf Eichmann in 1962, hanged for genocide and crimes against humanity. But Netanyahu's government has just passed hard-right national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir's new death-penalty law, solely for Palestinians who are convicted of terrorism. And yet moderate, centrist-liberal Israelis read about it, take a bite of their avocado toast and scroll down.

With the Death Penalty for Terrorists Law now on the statute, gallows have been shown being built on Israeli television. Some take to the streets in protest. Too many, however, simply reach for the mute button.

News stories that ought to bring down a government keep coming at a flabbergasting rate. In July, the minister for environmental protection reclassified Nile crocodiles as "cultivated wild animals" in order that Ben-Gvir could fill a moat around a prison holding Palestinians with deadly reptiles. "This is cartoon-villain cruelty," my Israeli friend Tomer said.

This coming election will determine whether she and her young family stay or emigrate. "Our government is filled with bloodthirsty bullies who only know how to scream. But even worse," she continued, "they have too many slick advisers writing fascist laws every day. At this rate, I'm not sure what will be left of this country. If they win again."

Those of us who have the privilege to do something about Netanyahu's government have a moral obligation to use our votes before Israel's democracy dissolves further. Don't wait for the next catastrophe to ask why more of us didn't act while we still could.

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