

LESSONS FROM THE ISRAELI EXPERIENCE WITH A NATIONAL UNITY PARITY COALITION, 1984-88.

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Background

Early elections were called in Israel for July 1984. The results for the two big parties – the Labor Alignment and the Likud – showed a close and competitive election which separated one from the other by only 3 seats (the same number of seats that separates the CDU/CSU and the SPD after the most recent German elections), out of the total of 120 seats in the Israeli parliament, the *Knesset*.

The Alignment won 44 seats. The potential coalition partners of the Alignment, the Citizens Rights Movement and Shinui [Change], each won 3 seats. Two new center parties, Yahad [Together] and Ometz [Courage], won 3 and 1 seats, respectively, and supported a government lead by the Alignment. The Israeli Arab parties, the Democratic Front for Change and Equality and the Jewish-Arab Progressive List for Peace won 4 and 2 seats, respectively. Likud won 41 seats. Its potential coalition partners included Tehiya [Renaissance] which won 5 seats, and the six religious parties who together won 14 seats.

The balance of supporters for each side created a political stalemate:
Center-left parties (50) + Arab parties (6) + center parties (4) = 60 seats.
Center-right (46) + religious parties (14) = 60 seats.

According to the “Basic Law: The Government”, after a legislative election the President of Israel – a largely ceremonial position, elected by the parliament – consults with the leaders of all the political parties who have won seats in the *Knesset*. He then decides to designate one of them to form a coalition government. The stalemate made it impossible for any leader to form a majority coalition government. In this aspect the 1984 election results in Israel differ from the most recent German elections – the SPD has “arithmetic” possibilities for forming a majority coalition. However, since the CDU/CSU won more seats, the political impasse is similar.

In order to avoid another election or a minority government, the result was the formation of a national unity parity coalition. The coalition was made up of both the Alignment and the Likud, which together held 85 seats and were thus a clear majority, along with six additional parties for a total of 97 seats. The Alignment and Likud each had 10 ministers in the national unity parity coalition, while the remaining six parties had 1 minister each. The position of Prime Minister was to be rotated between the two leaders of the main parties, each serving for two years. The national unity parity coalition stayed in power for almost its entire term of office, a major accomplishment in Israeli politics, until the 1988 elections.

Mechanisms of the National Unity Parity Coalition

The national unity coalition agreement was based on the principal of parity, which in turn was based on implicit mechanisms that gave each of the two main parties a mutual veto. There were also explicit mechanisms that extended the mutual veto. These mechanisms included:

Parity Coalition Principles:

1. Parity in the number of Likud and Labor ministers.
2. Parity in the total number of ministers for each “camp” (that is, Labor/Likud and their affiliated parties).
3. Rotation of the Prime Minister: The Labor party leader would be Prime Minister for the first half of the coalition’s tenure in office, and subsequently the Likud leader would be Prime Minister for remaining period.
4. During the time that each party leader is not the Prime Minister, they would serve as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.
5. The Prime Minister cannot fire a minister from the opposing party or “camp” without the agreement of the Deputy Prime Minister.
6. Parity in the relative weight (i.e., the importance and status) of the ministries of each party and “camp”.
7. The creation of an “inner” cabinet comprised of 10 ministers, with 5 ministers from each “camp”.
8. Parity within any Ministerial Committees established during the tenure of the coalition.
9. Parity in the parliamentary leadership of the coalition (6 MPs from each “camp”), and rotation of its chairperson.
10. The Chairperson of the parliamentary leadership of the coalition was from the party of the Deputy Prime Minister (that is, not the party of the Prime Minister).

Additional *Explicit* Mutual Veto Mechanisms:

1. Both sides must approve the raising of any motions for the agenda and private member bills.
2. Both sides must approve the addition of any coalition partners beyond those in the original agreement.

Pros and Cons of a National Unity Parity Coalition

Pros:

1. Due to its size (an overwhelming legislative majority), and the resulting lack of an effective opposition, the coalition government can use the initial momentum to solve difficult problems, including those that have traditionally been rejected by various entrenched interests. In the Israeli case, two such successes were the withdrawal of Israeli Defense Forces from most of Lebanon and the adoption of an emergency economic plan to combat hyper-inflation.
2. Most public opinion polls show that the public supported the establishment and the continued survival of the national unity government.
3. The policies of the national unity parity coalition government represented the “median voter” in the Israeli public, and its policies were as close as possible to the overall preferences of the voters.
4. Extreme policies and parties were mutually vetoed.
5. The coalition survives almost its complete tenure in office.

Cons:

1. Lack of an effective legislative opposition in terms of democratic governance in general and executive oversight in particular.
2. Lack of a possible alternative coalition confronting the government and forcing it to be accountable.
3. After the initial period is over and consensus issues are solved, governing becomes more difficult and vetoing the other side becomes the dominant pattern.
4. The national unity parity coalition, due to its size and composition, verifies public suspicions that politicians are interested in obtaining office and that policy disagreements between the main parties are largely for electoral purposes.
5. The two large parties will likely lose support in the next elections – due to the sharing of responsibility for the increasing paralysis in government – which will make it more difficult for either one to form a coalition government in the future.

Conclusion

The Israeli experience with a national unity parity coalition implies that parity governments can be an excellent mechanism of consensus building and problem solving for the short run, as a result of indecisive elections, but in the long run both democracy in general and the main political parties in particular are better off with a viable legislative opposition.