

Once kingmakers, Israel's religious parties may face political extinction

As a new right wing emerges, two of Israel's three religious parties may not make it through the next election cycle: 'There is definitely reason for optimism'

Judy Maltz | Jan. 13, 2019 | 11:54 PM | ■ 2

Relatively small religious parties have always wielded a disproportionate amount of power in Israel. Without them, the big parties cannot usually form coalitions, and this allows the religious parties to extract a hefty price for their participation – often in the form of funding and legislation that benefit their constituents.

But perhaps no longer, if election polls are to be trusted. Two out of three religious parties that are members of the current coalition, according to the polls, might not pass the electoral threshold – currently 3.25 percent of the vote – when elections are held on April 9.

One such party is the settler-aligned Habayit Hayehudi, which holds eight seats (out of a total of 120) in the outgoing Knesset. Its predicted collapse is tied to a rather unexpected development: Two weeks ago, party leaders Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked announced they were breaking away and forming a brand new right wing party that would have both religious and non-religious Israelis on its slate. A key factor behind this surprise move was their desire to break free of the rabbis – many of them quite radical – who effectively run Habayit Hayehudi.

Polls show that the new party, Hayamin Hehadash, would get anywhere from 6 to 14 seats in the next Knesset – in other words, almost as many, if not more, than the old party.

Hayamin Hehadash has yet to unveil its official platform, but Bennett has suggested that on matters of religion and state, it would draw inspiration from the well-known Gavison-Medan Covenant. Drafted more than 15 years ago by law professor Ruth Gavison and prominent Orthodox rabbi and

educator Yakov Medan, it recommended several key changes to the religious status quo in Israel. The covenant proposed, for example, that couples be allowed to marry as they choose and not be required to register with the Orthodox-controlled Chief Rabbinate. It recommended keeping most businesses closed but allowing for cultural events, entertainment and a reduced schedule of public transportation on Shabbat. It also proposed that no one group be allowed to maintain a monopoly on burial arrangements, dietary laws, religious services and prayer rules at the Western Wall.

>> This ultra-Orthodox woman is looking to make history in the Israeli election

In a tweet posted on Thursday, Bennett confirmed this was, indeed, the direction of his new party. “The platform will stipulate that we support Jewish rootedness and tradition but oppose religious coercion,” he wrote.

The old Habayit Hayehudi, on the other hand, is an incarnation of the National Religious party Mafdal. Its main constituency is the Israeli equivalent of the Modern Orthodox community. With few exceptions, this party has been represented in every coalition since the creation of the state. If Habayit Hayehudi does not win enough votes to gain seats in the next Knesset, it would mark the end of a historical era.

Another party teetering on the electoral threshold, according to recent polls, is Shas, a party that draws its support from the Mizrahi community – Jews with origins in the Middle East and North Africa. While Shas’s representatives in the Knesset have always been ultra-Orthodox, its voters tend to be less rigid in their religious beliefs.

Shas was formed in the mid-1980s and holds seven seats in the outgoing Knesset. At its peak, about 20 years ago, it held 17 seats. Like their counterparts in United Torah Judaism (UTJ), the ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi party, Shas lawmakers take their marching order from a council of “rabbinical sages.” Neither of these ultra-Orthodox parties allows women on its slate.

Since the death of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the founder and longtime spiritual leader of Shas, five years ago, the party has been struggling to maintain its appeal. The latest threat to its hold on power is Gesher, a new party founded

by Orly Levy-Abekasis that is likely to target the same working-class Mizrahi voters. According to recent polls, Gesher would receive about as many seats as Shas currently has. If Shas fails to pass the electoral threshold, it would also mark the end of a 35-year era of representation in the Knesset.

A poll conducted by the Jerusalem-based Israel Democracy Institute provides further evidence of the declining popularity of parties like Shas. Published on Thursday, its monthly public opinion survey found that 69 percent of Israelis do not want ultra-Orthodox parties to be part of the next government.

“If Shas and Habayit Hayehudi don’t make it in to the next Knesset, United Torah Judaism will be the only religious party left, and that will obviously affect its ability to drive a hard bargain during the coalition negotiations,” says Nerya Knafo, the director of Jewish Pluralism Watch, a watchdog organization sponsored by the conservative movement in Israel.

In such a scenario, he says, all sorts of legislative and other initiatives previously blocked by the religious parties could receive a new lease on life. That would include, for example, the agreement to create a new and expanded egalitarian prayer space at the Western Wall, where the Reform and Conservative movements would enjoy full recognition. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reneged on this agreement, after it had earned cabinet approval, because his religious coalition partners were threatening to pull out over it.

“If you take a close look at Netanyahu’s statements on issues of religion and state,” says Knafo, “it becomes clear that he holds liberal views and would very much like to introduce change, but time and again, he is pulled in the other direction by his Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox coalition partners. Without them – or at least, without some of them in the picture – we could be in for some important positive change.”

That could also include, he says, legislation that would allow for certain forms of civil marriage in Israel, a new “friendlier” conversion law, limited forms of public transportation on Shabbat and amendments to the surrogacy law that would provide gay men with equal opportunities for parenthood.

“As far as religion and state issues are concerned, it definitely looks like the

next Knesset will be an improvement over the current one,” says Knafo, “but then again, we may be in for a big surprise if the small religious parties decide to merge before the election to give themselves a better chance of getting in.” Indeed, possible mergers of this sort are reportedly under discussion.

Rabbi Uri Regev, the president of Hiddush, an organization that promotes religious equality and freedom in Israel, notes that as a condition for entering coalition governments, the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox parties have typically demanded either preserving the religious status quo or obtaining veto power over any legislation pertaining to religion and state matters. “That explains, for example, why we haven’t made any headway in initiatives that would promote freedom of marriage in recent years,” he says.

Regev is not convinced that Bennett and Shaked genuinely support religious pluralism, citing statements they’ve issued in the past. But whatever the case may be, he says, “a decrease in the political presence of Haredi [ultra-Orthodox] or Hardali [settler-aligned, ultra-Orthodox] parties in the Knesset, by definition, increases the strength of those who subscribe to a truly Jewish and Democratic state that promises religious freedom.”

Aliza Lavie, head of the Knesset caucus on religion and state matters and a member of the oppositionist Yesh Atid party, says she is hopeful things will be improve after the election, noting that in the outgoing Knesset, the religious parties had obtained veto rights on any legislation pertaining to religion and state matters. “Because of this veto, our hands were tied,” she says. “In fact, the only piece of progressive legislation we were able to pass in the outgoing Knesset was a bill that prevents an employer from forcing non-religious Jews to work on Shabbat. That was it.”

If at least two of the three religious parties don’t pass the electoral threshold, she predicts, it will be far easier to push through legislation that is in line with the Gavison-Medan Covenant.

“There is definitely reason for optimism,” she says.

