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The Presidentialization of Politics: The Power and Constraints of the Israeli Prime Minister

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The Presidentialization of Politics: The Power and Constraints of the Israeli Prime Minister

Dan Korn

In presidential systems the offices of head of state and head of government are merged institutionally and held by a single incumbent. Parliamentary democracies, on the other hand, are characterized by a 'double-headed' executive. A prime minister serves as the 'political executive' and a monarch or a president serves as the country's head of state – the 'constitutional executive'.

IN SUPPORT OF PRIME MINISTERIAL POWER

In recent decades, many scholars have asserted that parliamentary and cabinet government has been supplanted by the establishment of 'prime ministerial government'. According to this perspective, the increased role of government in the political system, i.e., the expansion of the core executive, has served to imbue the prime minister with ever greater powers. This is a clear manifestation of 'presidentialization' in parliamentary democracies.

There are a good number of reasons which tend to explain the increasing power of the prime minister. To begin with, as in any parliamentary democracy, the size of a government's parliamentary majority probably constitutes the single most important component among the political parameters of executive leadership in the legislative arena.

The size of the government's parliamentary majority can have an impact on a prime minister's power, for a premier whose party has been elected with a large majority generally has more scope for exercising somewhat greater power than one who presides over a narrow, possibly dwindling, majority. Moreover, the position of the head of government in parliamentary democracies is significantly strengthened if he or she is the leader of the dominant, governing party. In other words, the bigger the governing party, the stronger is the prime minister's power.

In recent decades, parliamentary and cabinet government have been supplanted by the establishment of 'prime ministerial government.'

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Likewise, the stronger the governing party vis-à-vis its coalition partners, the stronger is the power of the prime minister. David Ben-Gurion, Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir, who were prime ministers during the era of the Labor party's dominance of Israeli politics (1948-77), were particularly powerful leaders.

Executive-legislative relations are determined to a large extent by the political results in general elections. A recent general election victory coupled with a weak and divided opposition makes the prime minister a very powerful figure. David Ben Gurion, the first Israeli prime minister, won five consecutive general elections (1949, 1951, 1955, 1959 and 1961). He was the only prime minister (of twelve) who is generally seen as having resigned voluntarily. Most other prime ministers eventually faced more-or-less severe opposition from within their own parties, which considered they had become significant electoral liabilities.

The overall position of the head of government is also influenced by how unified is the cabinet. An important political variable may be seen in the usual type of government, which can be either single-party or a coalition government. It seems that the capacity of the chief executive to exert strong policy leadership tends to be greater in a single-party government than in a coalition. Tony Blair, who headed three single-party governments in Britain for about a decade, was a stronger prime minister than almost all of those who have headed only coalition governments in a country like Israel.

In other words, one of the most important characteristics influencing the role of the head of government within the cabinet relates to the number of parties participating in a given government. *Ceteris paribus*, the internal decision-making costs of a cabinet depend on the number of parties involved, and tend to be highest in a multi-party coalition government. Moreover, 'grand coalitions' involving two more-or-less equally strong major players may restrict the chief executive's leeway even more, as was the case in Israel's three national unity governments headed by the Labor Party's Shimon Peres and the Likud's Yitzhak Shamir in the 1984-1990 period.

Where there is a coalition government, the cabinet is far from being totally united and the political control of the prime minister is rather limited, not least because he does not appoint all the cabinet ministers. Parties which serve as coalition partners insist on deciding for themselves who will represent them in the cabinet.

The prime minister seems to possess the right to decide upon appointments and dismissals of an overwhelming majority of members of the cabinet as well as on the major political appointments below the cabinet level. To be sure, career politicians are dependent on prime ministerial patronage to further their political careers – this is, indeed, a powerful mechanism.

The chief executive position within the executive branch has been strengthened by the increasing demands of policy co-ordination which, in turn, have resulted in a significant increase in the personnel and financial resources available for setting up an apparatus at the exclusive disposal of the head of the government.

The role of the full cabinet as a true decision-making body has declined and there has been a marked tendency towards centralizing decision-making in the prime minister's office.

Generally speaking, the role of the full cabinet as a true decision-making body has declined, and there has been a marked tendency towards centralizing decision-making in the prime minister office.

Israel and Germany are good examples of governmental systems where the full cabinet has rarely been the true center of decision-making. In Israel, there is a “kitchen cabinet” which enjoys constitutional authority to make final decisions in lieu of the full cabinet on security issues.

The prime minister's office (which is not large compared with a regular departmental ministry) provides the prime minister with institutional support, especially on policy issues. This is particularly true if the prime minister is inclined to involve himself in the work of ministries.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres of Israel provided a good example of a prime minister who tended to engage in such involvement with regard to ministerial colleagues and their departments. Moreover, the prime minister tends to chair cabinet committees which are deemed particularly important, such as defense and foreign policy, intelligence, etc. and committees in which he has a personal interest or a particular agenda.

The increasing prominence of the prime minister in the public arena has been accompanied by significant changes in the relationship between the prime minister and his party. The traditionally strong focus of the public and the media on a party leader has gradually been transformed into a widespread public perception of a leader *being* his party. The leader is perceived as the embodiment of his party rather than merely the chief advocate and representative of the party's manifestos and policies. This state of affairs seems to suggest that there is now a considerable degree of “plebiscitary leadership”, which has developed at the expense of the political parties and the traditional forms of party leadership.

The specific effects of the personalization of the executive power vary between parliamentary and presidential systems of government. In a presidential system like the United States a popular president can more easily advance public policy programs, and the candidates of his party who ride on his 'coat-tails' find it easier to be elected to congress. In parliamentary democracies, rather than having a strong impact on executive-legislative relations, a prime ministerial prominence is more likely to have a significant effect on his position within the cabinet and within his own party.

The chief executive's position within the executive branch and in relation to parties and other political players in the wider political process *has been upgraded* as a result of the effects of the modern mass media, which favor a high degree of personalization of politics. To a large extent, media reporting on politics and political leaders has in fact become more or less part of the 'celebrity industry'. Being a political celebrity and enjoying a supportive media undoubtedly add to the resources a leader has at his disposal in the decision-making arena.

The development of modern, 'globalized' mass-media coupled with the rise of international 'summit politics', have strengthened the power of the chief executive because of his direct and

personal involvement in foreign affairs. For example, Tony Blair of Britain, as a particularly capable media prime minister, was able to pursue his policy of participating in the Iraq war, even though he was opposed by a majority within his party and among the British people (to be sure, no British post-war single-party government has been elected by an absolute majority of voters).

Prime ministerial authority is largely relational, and is dependent also on the standing of the prime minister in the opinion polls. The higher the rating, the higher is the prime minister's political authority. The prime minister's power also varies according to the extent that his cabinet colleagues permit him to have that power: competence and integrity of ministerial colleagues, clear objectives and strategy of the cabinet, a cohesive parliamentary party based on the strength of the government majority in parliament, and also popular opinion in the electorate and attitudes in the party – all serve to provide the prime minister with strong political power and authority.

There are some institutions that may have an impact on executive power. If there is a strong 'parliamentary sovereignty' which implies that parliament has the right to make or unmake any law whatever and, further, that no person or body is recognized by the law as having a right to override or set aside parliamentary legislation, the power of the prime minister and his cabinet is increased since they have the parliamentary majority.

If there is a weak supreme court which cannot declare acts of parliament to be invalid then the prime minister is in a very powerful position. Britain is a good case in point. In the U.S. there is an institutionalized system of national judicial review regarding acts of congress which has the power to strike down unconstitutional legislation. Thus, the Supreme Court serves as an important institutional check on executive power. By contrast, the constitutional court in Germany not only shows a deference to the legislative decisions of governing majorities; it occasionally even eases the burden of governments by 'taking the heat' for unpopular decisions and pointing the way for the legislators to follow.

In Israel, the Supreme Court has also regarded itself since 1992 as a constitutional court, but only on rare occasions has it struck down Knesset laws as illegal

In Israel, the Supreme Court also regards itself, as of 1992, as a constitutional court and, on rare occasions, declares Knesset laws illegal if the court finds that they negate Basic Laws. Moreover, political expediency has provided easy and fast ways for amending laws and the constitution, i.e. Basic Laws. Still, Israeli politicians have been rather careful not to pass a referendum law that would transfer political power to the electorate.

A high degree of centralization of state institutions also influences the national executive power. In Israel, there is no second chamber and no federal system, and local government is rather weak. The result is, of course, a powerful national government and a strong prime minister. Still, interest groups, like the Histadrut (the largest trade union organization) and the

civil service can, to an extent, challenge the central authority. In Britain by contrast, the very centralized political system has been changed with the introduction of Devolution – a Scottish Parliament, a Welsh Assembly and a parliament in Northern Ireland – all of which have chipped away at the power of Westminster in London, England.


The “standing” of the central bank also affects national executive power. A weak central bank which lacks real independence does not have an impact on the major strategic economic decisions of the government. Its influence is extremely limited. In Israel until several years ago and in Britain, the central banks are less independent than are those in Germany and the U.S.

In Israel, the existence of a single-party government or a large dominant party in a coalition government, together with a rather small, divided and powerless parliamentary opposition, a high degree of 'party cohesion', a large 'payroll vote' (the proportion of members of parliaments holding governmental office – in Israel it is about 40 out of 120 and in Britain 95 out of 650) and, most important, the near absence of strong barriers against majority rule - have all worked to secure the chief executive's tight grip on parliament. Under such circumstances, a growing tendency towards a 'de-parliamentarization' of the governing process may develop. It is manifested in the decreasing involvement of the prime minister in the parliamentary process.

A good example of this is to be found in recent years in Israel with the prime minister announcing major policies outside parliament, and thus the legislature is expected to support policies that were not really debated in the plenum or in parliamentary committees. Moreover, in many parliamentary democracies, the prime minister possesses the unconditional right to dissolve parliament (through an official proclamation by the head of state) without the need to secure even the cabinet's approval.

In addition to the legal and institutional structures, the prime minister's personal style also affects executive power. This is especially apparent if there is an innovative prime minister, i.e., a prime minister who is determined to make an impact, and leave a lasting legacy in terms of policy initiatives. It is this type of prime minister who is deemed by some to be developing a 'prime ministerial' or even 'presidential' system of government in place of cabinet or parliamentary government.

David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, is a good example of an innovative leader whose actions shaped the political system for many decades. There is also the prime minister who is involved in creating major reforms but in this case, unlike the innovative prime minister, the goals are broadly shared by his party. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres were the top officials most connected with the 1993 Oslo Agreement, but the policy was not named after them because they pursued agreed party policy, even though Rabin was murdered because of this policy in the early stages of its



In Israel, as in other parliamentary democracies, the fusion between the executive and legislative branches tends to particularly strengthen and favor executive power, especially that of the chief executive.

implementation. Likewise, the establishment of a welfare state 'from cradle to grave' in Britain in the late 1940's, was not named "Attleeism" (after Clement Attlee the then prime minister), because all Labor supporters were in favor of a welfare state.

The fusion between the executive and legislative branches in parliamentary democracies tends to particularly strengthen and favor executive power, especially that of the chief executive. In most parliamentary democracies the compatibility of a governmental office with a seat in the parliament is not only legally permitted but also politically expedient, for a number of reasons.

First, when members of the government can participate in the internal decision-making process within their own parliamentary party group, the necessary co-ordination between the government and its parliamentary supporters is eased to a significant degree. Second, parliamentary control of the executive is rendered more effective by utilizing insider knowledge that ministers may contribute to parliamentary deliberations and questioning.

Finally, compatibility can be considered to have an overall positive impact on the system's capacity for recruiting political elites, as committed and able politicians do not have to make a choice between the branches of government in which they want to serve.

By contrast, in presidential systems there is "separation-of-powers", i.e., members of the executive are not allowed to hold a seat in the legislature during their incumbency. This is why a U.S. president has to use formal and informal powers in the bargaining process with congress in the hope of persuading the members to support his policies. The prime minister in a parliamentary democracy is, at least theoretically, in a better position vis-à-vis parliament.

CONSTRAINING THE PRIME MINISTER'S POWER

Despite complaints about the rise of 'prime ministerial government' or 'presidentialism', there appear to be significant constraints facing contemporary prime ministers. First, it can be argued that the power of the premier has been exaggerated, for ultimately a prime minister is dependent upon the support of cabinet colleague' (as well as of backbenchers, of course), and thus he is only as powerful as his senior ministers allow him to be. A prime minister is, in effect, captain of his team, but he owes his position (and its very real powers) to the team itself. Characteristic of prime ministerial "power" is precisely its contingent character and the practical limitations which premiers have invariably encountered, irrespective of their formal or constitutional powers.

The very complexity of contemporary society can serve as evidence of the constraints facing any modern prime minister. No prime minister can seriously expect to grasp the intricacies of more than a few policies at any particular time. Indeed, beyond the realms of security and defense policy, international relations, and economic affairs, prime

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ministerial involvement in domestic policy initiatives has generally been sporadic and/or ad hoc.

A lack of time and expertise means that the prime minister is obliged to leave many, if not most, domestic policies to be handled by his ministerial colleagues. The prime minister cannot involve himself in too many policy issues at any one time. When he deals with crises and spent time on them, he has less time for other issues. This state of affairs suggests that in many respects, the prime minister is as dependent upon his senior ministers for policy success as they are on him.

Yet, a prime minister who is more collegial, in the sense that he is inclined to encourage greater discussion of policy issues in the cabinet rather than attempting to lead from the front, is regarded a weak prime minister: He appears to follow his cabinet and party and not really lead them.

The second critique of the “prime ministerial government” thesis suggests that while the prime minister now enjoys a higher profile than before due to modern mass media and the frequency of international summits, the power which this often implies is largely illusory, for in the world beyond his own country – where the most important policy issues tend to originate – the prime minister is increasingly constrained by external or global factors.

Because of the increasing amount of time and energy expended in supranational forums, the prime minister’s time and energy is not being expended at home on domestic issues. He thus increasingly has to delegate matters to his ministerial colleagues, senior officials, and advisers. Also, the increasing number of international meetings on security, defense and foreign affairs which the prime minister is obliged to attend is itself an indication of the

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extent to which public policy is being 'globalized'. In fact, *national policies are no longer national*.

Meanwhile, to return to domestic politics, two other factors must be noted when considering the policy roles of the prime minister in the core executive, both of which further indicate the contingent character of his power and authority. First, irrespective of

his formal or constitutional powers, the actual power and authority of the prime minister cannot be isolated from the economic and political circumstances of his premiership.

It is apparent that even a strong prime minister is not consistently strong throughout his premiership. Economic circumstances, events or crises can impact the prime minister's authority and influence, sometimes enhancing it, sometimes undermining it. A major recession seems to constrain a prime minister, e.g., Yitzhak Shamir's 1983-4 Israel's government. Likewise, a failed military operation, such as the Olmert government’s 2006

decision to begin the Second Lebanese War, or else a military success, can transform the prime minister's position and rally a party behind him or against him.

Meetings between the prime minister and individual ministers are a rather regular phenomenon in cabinet dealings. It may simply be a means whereby the prime minister ensures that he is kept informed of a department's policy initiatives and progress, or they may be a means by which the prime minister seeks to impose his will on a minister.

While this scenario might be viewed as indicative of increased prime ministerial power, it is better understood as a further manifestation of the constraints imposed on him vis-à-vis his cabinet, the collective executive. These meetings are another indication of the 'resource dependency' which characterizes political relations within the cabinet and which render the prime minister, at least partially, dependent upon the support and cooperation of ministers in pursuing particular policies.

Meetings between the prime minister and individual ministers are a good indication of the 'resource dependency' of the Prime Minister, indicating that he is reliant on the support and cooperation of ministers in pursuing particular policies.

There seems to be interdependency between the prime minister and cabinet ministers. It is evident that while the prime minister's primary source of power is that of political authority, along with the dispensation of patronage (i.e., ministerial appointment, promotion, demotion and dismissal), individual ministers – along with their departmental civil servants and policy advisers - will generally possess time and expertise that may challenge the prime minister authority. In fact, a prime minister may be constrained on various policy issues by particularly strong and popular ministerial colleagues.

Prime ministers and their ministerial colleagues are, therefore, heavily dependent upon each other in various ways and in varying degrees to ensure the successful formulation and implementation of public policy. While a prime minister may have considerable authority over his cabinet colleagues much of the time, he will need their support and cooperation, as well as their departmental knowledge, in order to ensure that policy objectives are effectively pursued.

The emergence of a class of career politicians has made the task of managing parliament more demanding than it was earlier, as better-educated and more professional members of parliament tend to be less willing than their predecessors to toe the party line on any major issue. At the very least, they expect to be persuaded, rather than forced, to support a given bill. On the other hand, the steady increase in the number of career politicians has added structural strength to the position of the chief executive, as the concept of politics as a vocation includes the ambitions of members of parliament to secure governmental office.

There are prime ministers who had limited grasp of policy details when they assumed office. Benjamin Netanyahu became prime minister of Israel in 1996 following a comparatively short term as a parliament member, and had never been a minister before being appointed

chief executive. The same applies to Tony Blair of Britain who became prime minister with no previous cabinet experience at all. There are, of course, prime ministers with very rich policy expertise. Shimon Peres in Israel, Konrad Adenauer and Helmut Schmidt in Germany and Harold Macmillan in Britain as well as Lyndon Johnson in the U.S were the 'great professionals'. Serving as prime ministers or, in Johnson's case, as president, they had knowledge of policy details and already enjoyed substantial achievements in both international and domestic politics.

There are prime ministers who suffer from media hostility and seem to pay a high price for it. In 1964, Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol had no other option but to resign from the party leadership in a desperate attempt to restore his authority. Although he was confirmed as leader, he remained unpopular and barely succeeded in establishing his control over the fractious Labor party.

Eshkol was probably the first Israeli prime minister to be seriously damaged and punished by the media, due to his stammer-speech on the eve of the 1967 Six Day War. It was interpreted as a poorly handled leadership test in an international crisis, and he lost the position of defense minister. As prime minister in the years 1963-69, Eshkol continually had to contend with low ratings in opinion polls. It is only decades later that a consensus has been established among scholars of Israeli politics that he was among the best of the twelve prime ministers who have served the country thus far.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who was a poor speaker, hardly appeared on TV, radio or in public debates with his political rivals. His advisers, however, had tried to create the impression that his behavior suggested a rather effective leadership style. In the 2003 general election results, which Sharon won hands-down and became the leader of a dominant Likud party, they were proved right.

As for Prime Minister Menachem Begin, he was regarded during his early years in office as a strong and effective leader when he concluded the peace treaty with Egypt. His last few months in office (mid-1983), however, were marked by an almost eerie absence of prime ministerial leadership but the mass media kept silent.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert suffered constantly from scandals and corruption charges in his term of office and his ratings in the opinion polls were near zero after the Second Lebanon War in his first months in office. Eventually he was forced to resign and his governing party Kadima lost its leading position in Israeli politics.

Generally speaking, a strong and independent Supreme Court, high barriers to amending Basic Laws, strong bicameralism, availability and frequent use of referenda, strong interest groups which use protest and opposition as their natural strategy, strong local government, a strong and autonomous central bank and a complex system of checks and balances and power-sharing devices - all create an extremely tight network of institutional counterweights to majority rule.

These factors serve as “veto players” which erect barriers to majority rule and unfettered executive power that governments may face once they have been elected to office. These factors appear to set limits on the executive power of the prime minister.

Another factor to be considered is that of prime ministerial personality and style of leadership. Again, quite apart from the impact of wider economic and political circumstances, prime ministers will adopt different approaches to political leadership, deriving from their own particular personal style and personality. As such, the formal constitutional powers granted to all prime ministers will actually be exercised in different ways, a key consideration which should further encourage skepticism when confronted by complaints about the rise of prime ministerial government.

One of the most striking things about outstanding leaders in any historical period is the extent to which the failed or incomplete aspects of their political projects may be traced to flaws in their personalities rather than to any inexorable constraints imposed by environmental factors. Still, Jean Blondel (1987:47) suggested: " Whatever 'romantic' views some literary figures may have had about the role of Napoleon or other great ' heroes', the 'scientific' analysis of society seemed to suggest...that in reality leaders scarcely mattered and that they were replaceable or interchangeable: they were symbols of historical trends, not the engines of history".

The above quotation notwithstanding, truly vigorous leadership which can alter the course of history to some degree, seems quite possible. The centrality of executive leadership as a key dimension of the democratic process becomes clear from our discussion. The phenomenon of globalization has called into question the significance of national executives as key actors and decision makers. The increasing role of international organizations which are involved in decision-making has created limitations to the power of national executives.

Additionally, the increasing role of local government has weakened the authority of the national government. Still, the functions of the national executive and the chief executive remain a matter of utmost importance because people in many democratic countries may want more government action, not less, simply in order to counter the adverse effects of international markets and arenas.

THE 2009 GOVERNMENT OF PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU

The general elections to the 18th Knesset (Israel's parliament) took place in February 2009. In post-election consultations it appeared that six parties: Likud (27), Yisrael Beitenu (15), Shas (11), United Torah Judaism (5), Ichud Leumi (4) and Habayit Hayehudi – New National Religious Party (3), could form a center-right parliamentary block with the support of 65 out of the 120 members of the Knesset.

Thus, President Shimon Peres asked Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of the Likud party, to attempt to form a government. On April 1, 2009 Netanyahu's new coalition government took

office following a successful vote of confidence in the Knesset. It became the thirty-second government in Israel's 62 years of existence.

Six parties joined the governing coalition: five parties of the above center-right parliamentary block (the right-wing Ichud Leumi did not join the government), with the center-left Labor party as the sixth coalition partner. The entry of Labor into the coalition of center-right parties is regarded a very successful move by Prime Minister Netanyahu, since Labor provides a more centrist image to an otherwise right-wing government.

To secure the support of Labor, Netanyahu was willing to give the party very generous coalition payoffs: five ministers, two deputy ministers and some other offices such as chairmanship of a parliamentary committee. One of the cabinet portfolios given to Labor was the defense ministry, the most important position after the prime ministry. Thus, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, leader of the Labor party, became "number two" in the cabinet.

With Labor, Netanyahu's coalition government enjoys the support of 74 out of 120 Knesset members. The size of the government's parliamentary majority seems rather impressive.

The cabinet comprising Netanyahu's coalition government is the largest in Israeli history and seems likely to last. Out of the 74 coalition members in the Knesset, 40 are in the category of the "payroll vote" – 30 ministers, 9 deputy ministers and the Knesset Speaker.

Moreover, the opposition is not only weak but also sharply divided: 11 of its members belong to 3 different Arab party lists, 3 members are of a leftist party (Meretz), 28 members belong to Kadima, basically a center party, and 4 members are from the extreme right-wing Ichud Leumi party. Moreover,

Netanyahu has initiated and passed legislation which was aimed at splitting Kadima, the main opposition party, but thus far (April 2010) it has not happen.

Netanyahu's government seems likely to hold its coalition partners together. This is because out of its 74 Knesset members, 40 are in the category of the so-called "payroll vote" – 30 ministers, 9 deputy ministers and the Knesset Speaker. Given the fact that there are 30 ministers in Netanyahu's coalition government (the largest number in Israeli history), it is clear that the prime minister has made ministerial appointments for various reasons besides real requirements, ability, and fitness for the job. These include simple patronage, aiming at insuring loyalty and support of the factions within the governing party and the coalition partners. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that the number of ministers and deputy ministers have tended to rise. Netanyahu seems to have ulterior motives in including various interests of the political spectrum beyond his natural right-wing coalition, and thus has created a broad coalition of political and social forces.

Apparently, Netanyahu has learned a lesson from his narrowly-based 1996-99 coalition government that was dismantled within less than three years due to conflicts among the coalition partners. The fact that Netanyahu was directly elected by Israel's voters to become

Netanyahu sees his primary role as maintaining and restoring national unity and social stability after a period of political uncertainty. Such a prime minister will, therefore, pursue policies which are explicitly intended to diminish sources of conflict.

the prime minister didn't help him much since the system of government (and the electoral system) at the time required the constant support of a majority in the Knesset, which he lost in his third year.

There was yet another important reason for the dissolution of the 1996 government. Prime Minister Netanyahu advanced two controversial policies stemming from the 1993 Oslo Agreements – the Hebron and the Wye agreements (both of which transferred land to the control of the Palestinian Authority). This was too much for some of his own party leaders and coalition partners and they accelerated the downfall of the government. Netanyahu had learnt yet another lesson.

In 2009, Netanyahu wanted to bring into his coalition government as many partners as possible, regardless of policy differences among them. A prime minister who behaves in this fashion could be called a “balancer”. This refers to a prime minister whose primary concern is to maintain party and coalition unity, particularly when faced with ideological tensions and disagreements over policy. The survival of the coalition government is of utmost importance to him.

It might also mean that he sees his primary role as maintaining and restoring national unity and social stability after a period of political uncertainty or upheaval. Such a prime minister will, therefore, pursue policies which are explicitly intended to diminish sources of conflict, be they within the government itself or in the country at large.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could definitely be placed in this category. Declarations and political speeches notwithstanding, he cherishes the status quo for ideological reasons and has been preoccupied with keeping the conflicts within his coalition under control. Netanyahu is spending considerable time and energy trying to maintain a semblance of unity within an increasingly fractious coalition and government. Not only does this style reflect his own personality and character, he also apparently deems it necessary to act as a “balancer” prime ministers in order to heal the divisions wrought by the many coalition partners.

Netanyahu is spending considerable time and energy to maintain a semblance of unity within an increasingly fractious government. This reflects his own personality and character, but he also sees it as necessary to act as a “balancer prime minister” in order to heal the divisions between his coalition partners.

Even though the government has a large parliamentary majority, the great number of diverse coalition partners creates a problem for the prime minister, i.e., his opportunity for policy maneuvers is very limited. Such a situation leads to the widespread perception that the prime minister is weak and gives the impression of *being in office, but not in power*.

Under these circumstances the coalition government's political survival seems secure enough. Its capability to effectively execute policies, however, appears rather problematic. There is no doubt that the capacity to maintain cohesive policy positions tends to be weak in a six-party coalition government, especially when it consists of parties from both the center-right and the center-left of the political party map.

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The relative weakness of Prime Minister Netanyahu, at least in terms of his capability to formulate and implement policy, is partly related to the size of his own Likud party. The Likud has only 27 Knesset seats and thus needs many coalition partners in order to maintain a stable parliamentary majority, i.e. a coalition government with the support of well over 60 Knesset members. In such a coalition, the Likud party itself holds less than half of the Knesset seats and this constitutes a real problem: The Likud is the governing party but not the dominant party. In the past, the governing parties, whether Likud or Labor, each held over 40 seats in the Knesset and thus were rather powerful. They also needed coalition partners but they could easily dictate the policy agenda.

In the 2009 coalition government led by the Likud, the relations between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, the two most senior figures in the cabinet, are of utmost importance. Indeed, relations between strong ministers can have a significant impact on the rest of the cabinet and serious implications for the overall performance of the government itself.

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A close and harmonious relationship between the two top ministers will probably unite the cabinet, whereas divisions and disagreements between them might facilitate damaging factionalism within the governing party and among the coalition partners. A falling-out between the two ministers may develop from ideological disagreements, policy disputes, personality clashes or rival leadership ambitions.

From a political viewpoint Netanyahu's government appears to be rather stable. From a policy viewpoint, however, the prime minister cannot, and probably does not want to, formulate and implement policy on major issues lest his coalition dissolve.

Thus, Netanyahu appears to be a rather weak prime minister whose term in office is *based on dependency, not command*.

Unlike Barak, Netanyahu's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, the unchallenged leader of Yisrael Beiteinu, the second largest partner in the coalition with 15 Knesset seats, is not a very effective minister regardless of the political strength of his party. Formally, Lieberman possesses extreme policy views, mostly on the national issue: Israel's relations with the Arab world and the Palestinians. His views are rather problematic because they are expressed by the "number one" Israeli diplomat – the foreign minister.

It is interesting to note that President Shimon Peres has served on a number of occasions as the "alternative" foreign minister for the purpose of expressing more moderate views regarding Israel's foreign policy in international arenas. This phenomenon is a sign of "creeping presidentialism", the President of the state who is supposed to be a symbol "above politics", is very much involved in politics and policy affairs.

From this discussion we can see that the prime minister is the leading actor, but he is dependent on other actors to achieve his goals and "make the show successful". The prime minister is but one of several individuals and institutions at the center of the political system. In fact, the prime minister is dependent on other policy actors. He is not alone in the political arena. Thus, he needs to cooperate in order to advance and achieve his policy goals.

Two more political aspects relating to the future stability of the 2009 coalition government should be mentioned. First, Netanyahu is a strong prime minister because he is a powerful party leader. Netanyahu easily won the leadership contest in the Likud and he controls the party organs. Most important, currently there are no factional fights within the Likud and there is no serious challenger for the party leadership. This is why Netanyahu could suggest that the Likud party will accept (contrary to its manifesto) the "two-state solution" once a permanent peace is achieved.

Second, Netanyahu has been a great communicator who tried to create a "public premiership" aimed at managing the media. He is the first Israeli leader to see television as an impressionistic medium and to acquire some of the skills needed to create a favorable impression. It is clear that he is a prime minister with leadership qualities in the field of media-management and public relations.

Moreover, he has a deep interest in exploiting effective media-management as a tool of government. Also, as a prime minister from a right wing party, he is convinced that the broadcasting authorities and

the media have been infiltrated by leftists. This is why he encouraged the successful initiative to establish a new daily paper called "Yisrael Hayom" (Israel Today).

In a relatively short time, this paper has gained a huge readership and become the second most popular newspaper in Israel, distributed free all around the country. This is possible because its owner is Sheldon Adelson, a billionaire who is a close friend of Netanyahu. Currently there is a "media war" raging between the older established papers and Yisrael Hayom. This war may adversely affect Prime Minister Netanyahu because his wife Sarah has been the subject of vicious attacks by the older papers, which are concerned about the new media player.

In summary, from a political viewpoint, Netanyahu's 2009 coalition government appears to be rather stable. From a policy viewpoint, however, the prime minister cannot, and probably does not want to, formulate and implement policy on major issues lest his coalition dissolve. Thus, he appears to be a rather weak prime minister whose term in office is *based on dependency, not command*.

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