1. **Conclusions: *Judocracy* – Ideological Transformations and Structural Changes**

Netanyahu. It’s good for the Jews.

 (Netanyahu’s campaign slogan, 1996).



Netanyahu’s campaign, 1996.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Netanyahu has reinvented the Jewish people in the image of his brand of nationalism. A microphone recorded an infamous statement whispered by Netanyahu into Rabbi Kaduri’s ear over dinner in 1997: “The left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish” was the most memorable part, but he goes on to say, “They think that if we gave the Arabs part of the land, they would take care of us.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In 1996 “the left” still referred to being in favor of the two state solution – land for peace ­– and any strengthening of the Jewish position necessarily came at the expense of the Arabs. Finkelstein, Netanyahu’s American campaigner in the very personal, direct election between Peres and Netanyahu, a year after Rabin’s assassination in 1995, coined the slogan, “Only Netanyahu. It is good for the Jews.” The campaign slogan read: “Danger! What is good for the PLO and the Palestinians in not good for the Jews. They have decided: Peres. We would say: Only Netanyahu!” Back then, left and right still represented opposing but reasonable positions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Netanyahu was the driving force behind a campaign associating the left with the terrorism that killed hundreds of civilians in Israeli cities in the mind of the public.

The project aimed to arm the Jewish camp with a robust ethnoreligious identity and to negate the left – his political rivals – by repeating the narrative that they cared more about the rights of Arabs – the enemy – than those of Jews. The left was thus cast as unpatriotic, and their concerns about human rights were identified with aiding and abetting the enemy. In the context of the mid-1990s, with suicide bombers terrorizing the streets of Jerusalem, there was a pervasive atmosphere of threat and fear, ripe for manipulation. The external enemy was operating within the state, and the danger was internalized. However, it would take another decade and a half before Netanyahu would be able to create a unified national Jewish camp. His first premiership, as well as his time as Minister of Finance in Sharon’s government, were characterized by his neoliberal ambitions, and he modelled himself on his politically conservative heroes – Churchill, Thatcher, and Reagan. Neoliberalism and nationalism were inextricably entwined for him. Netanyahu, as a Finance Minister, was despised by ultra-Orthodox parties. His stance on disengagement from Gaza diminished the settlers’ trust in him. Under his leadership, Likud plummeted to a historical low – only 12 MKs in the 2006 election, lower, even, than in the first election in 1949, when Begin mustered only 14 MKs.

The defeat sent Netanyahu back to the drawing board and inspired the idea of “the other Israel.” As in the United States where, between the East and West coasts with their liberal cities like New York and San Francisco, lies another America, the Bible-belt, so, too, outside of Tel Aviv, the secular heartland, there was a different Israel: more religious and more conservative. It was in this Israeli Bible-belt that Netanyahu identified an opportunity. In a speech at a Likud rally he reassured his supporters that, “We’re not in trouble, we have Mizrahim and Ashkenazim, we have old-timers and new olim, we have secular people and we have religious people, we have Amona, and we have Dimona.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Amona and Dimona – the settlements and development towns of the social periphery – were Netanyahu’s ticket to rebuilding the Jewish people in his image and conceptualizing the nationalist camp.

It would be Netanyahu’s political life project to neutralize the Palestinians and to isolate their concerns from the traditional political continuum. Under Netanyahu’s influence, the left-right axis would become solely about Jews and Israelis. He took a poll, a tool he found useful in determining his political direction, that revealed that the majority of Israelis perceived themselves as Jews first and Israelis second. He thereby discovered the golden key to the Jewish majority in the state and in the Knesset; he just had to shape politics into a matching lock.

1. **Conceptual Morphology: National-Conservative Judocracy**

The core concepts of Netanyahu’s regime can be divided into four central themes: Jewish nationality; conservatism and obligations; governability and loyalty; popular democracy.

1. Jewish Ethnoreligious Nationalism

The declaration of independence was finalized by Ben-Gurion to reflect the journey of the Jewish people in their return to their historical homeland as a nation among nations, a sovereign people on its own land, and to determine the nature of the newly-born state as a democracy with full personal, social and political rights for all its citizens.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Jewish national movement – Zionism – put the land of Israel at its conceptual center. Modern secular nationalism transformed the once religious Jewish minority living in the diaspora into an independent democratic nation-state within a national territory. The people were transformed from the Jewish diaspora into the Israeli sabra, cultivating their own Biblical land and speaking Hebrew, a language reinvented as the unifying national language of the nation (Arabic had the same status until being downgraded 70 years later by Netanyahu’s Basic Law: Nation-State). The Israeli citizenry became the *demos*, enjoying substantial equality and a sharing in a promise to develop the land for the benefit of all its people. Thus crystallized the Israeli consensus that Israel was Jewish and democratic. A national democracy, like many European democracies, with a distinct national character, embedded in the holidays, the calendar, the Sabbath, the flag and hymn, but with civic and political equality for all citizens and autonomy for the three religions preserved from Ottoman rule and the British Mandate. The ethos of secular nationalism, the role of the courts as the guardians of civic rights, the pluralistic tradition of the Zionist currents, the liberal roots of socialist, political and revisionist Zionisms, and Ben-Gurion’s clear commitment to the Western democratic model, created a political framework aspiring to liberal democracy. The reality, of course, with the War of Independence breaking out immediately upon the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, military rule over Arab villages up until 1966, and the dominance of Mapai-related institutions, was less egalitarian and produced structural discrimination and resistance to the idea of Israel as a melting pot of diverse minorities both Jewish and Arab.

In order to secure long-lasting political change that would put Israel in the hands of the right wing and keep its leader in power for many years, Netanyahu adopted Begin’s mission of destabilizing the secular-national consensus and “reJudifying” the party system by casting the national narrative as an ethnoreligious history. Jewish history positions Jews as a minority, threatened religious community and this historical existential threat was instrumental to Netanyahu’s framing of his role as protector of the Jewish people in a hostile world. The image of a strong and defiant Israeli state, a plucky David against Goliath in the form of Iran and the threat of a second, nuclear holocaust, was crucial in cementing the idea of Jewish power in an inhospitable region. The “Judification” of the discourse facilitated the gathering of very different minority communities, with different aspirations and political leaderships, under one banner of the notion of a national-religious people – Eretz-Israel, with the ultra-Orthodox – both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, and the traditional *Masorti* Mizrahi masses, all united under one nationalist camp led by Netanyahu’s Likud. This new Jewish majority combined those groups, communities, and congregations that saw their collective identity as based on the Jewish religion. It was a reactionary idea focused on preserving the religious roots of the people, but it also implied a different type of governance: Jewish majority rule in opposition to the notion of the “state for all its citizens.” How did Netanyahu gather these diverse groups under one nationalist camp?

1. Holy Land and the Settlements

We have not taken a foreign land. We have returned to our land. The connection between our people and this land is eternal. It is from the dawn of history. It was never severed

(Menachem Begin, Special Knesset meeting in honor of Anuar Saadat, president of Egypt, November, 20 1977).[[5]](#footnote-5)

The national-religious cohorts, since Gush Emunim following the Six-Day War and, certainly, after the disengagement from Gaza led by Sharon, were closely identified with the Jewish settlements in the territories conquered beyond the Green Line in 1967. Netanyahu knew that they were suspicious of him because he had initially voted for disengagement and, only later began supporting the settlers, at least publicly. In a similarly contradictory move, Netanyahu had given the Bar-Ilan two-states speech and had then vowed to annex the settlements. Netanyahu understood that, in terms of the new national narrative, the settlements had become the spearhead of the Holy Land and, thereby, the heart of the nationalist camp. For the Israeli right wing, Zionism 2000s-style became identified with the settlements and the outright rejection of the idea of a Palestinian state and any form of negotiations. By then, the religious-national cohort represented 35% of IDF officers, were a visible force within the civil service, dominated political parties on the right, and were especially well-positioned within Likud activist circles and institutions. Netanyahu’s keen support of the settlements culminated in declaring his intention to annex all Jewish settlements to Israel. He argued at the *Peace for Prosperity* convention in Washington with President Trump that January 28, 2020 was the second most important day in Israel’s history because:

For too long –far too long– the very heart of the Land of Israel where our Patriarchs prayed, our Prophets preached, and our Kings ruled, has been outrageously branded as illegally occupied territory. Well, today, Mr. President, you are puncturing this big lie. You are recognizing Israel’s sovereignty over all the Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria, large and small alike.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The narrative presented by Netanyahu as Israel’s head of state in Washington is the ethnoreligious story of the land of the prophets. It is not about security, diplomacy, or national interests, but about extending Israel’s sovereignty into parts of its biblical homeland promised by God to the Jewish people. It is the settler narrative that was now identified with the nationalist camp. It fulfills Michael Freeden’s three core features of populism: social monism without an option of foreign penetration or expansion, in the form of an ethnoreligious society as a cohesive body; a founding moment, in the form of the idea that “we were here first” and that God had promised the Holy Land to his people; and the fear of change, in this case manifested as resistance to negotiations, and the belief that there is “no partner.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. The People, the Masses, the Base

Ashkenazi? Iraqi? Jews! Brothers! (Menachem Begin, 1981).[[8]](#footnote-8)

The ideological spearhead came from the pro-settlements right, but support was provided by the masses of traditional Jews, the majority of whom made aliya from Arab countries in the 1950s and were settled by the state of Israel in the periphery – in development towns in the north, south, and on the borders of Israel as centers servicing the much-heralded agricultural kibbutzim and moshavim. Many of these Jews had no direct experience of the Zionist movement as a secular-nationalist and anti-religious movement; their Zionism was a direct continuation of their religious beliefs. In Israeli statistical data, they were described as secular because they did not wear kippahs, but they were, in fact, traditionalists, Masorti, and being Jewish was their primary identity. Following Begin’s example, Netanyahu gave this population a sense of security and pride in their Jewish identity and a counter-narrative to that of the secular elites. They were alienated by the state secularism of Mapai; being legitimized as part of the Jewish, ruling majority since 1977 gave them enormous pride. Netanyahu galvanized their Jewish sentiments with his anti-elite claims that the founders of the state of Israel were also responsible for establishing structural discrimination against Mizrahi Jews. They became Netanyahu’s base. At Likud rallies, in electoral campaigns, and on social media, it was to this demographic that he addressed his message.

As demonstrated in Chapter 4, Miri Regev, Netanyahu’s last Minister of Culture and his most loyal minister, turned the 70th anniversary of Israeli independence into an opportunity to project this new national story, claiming: “It all comes together into one complete story. The story of a people. Our story.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The national reconstruction of the history of the people begins, and continues with a condensation of the Holocaust into three figures wearing yellow patches who take the stage, while in the background we hear the sounds of dogs barking and the rattle of train cars. Regev, self-reportedly, preferred to focus on other, “equally painful events” from the chronicles of the Jewish people, such as the destruction of the First and Second Temples.”[[10]](#footnote-10) However, the recoding of the national story is based on the reconceptualization of the “pioneers,” not just those in Degania, the first and only kibbutz mentioned in the ceremony, but in the development towns of Dimona, Kiryat Shmona, Yeruham and Migdal HaEmek.[[11]](#footnote-11) New narratives, new people, new pioneers. Historical discrimination was being rectified by Netanyahu’s Cultural Minister, granting the development towns, Likud’s base, the status of pioneers hitherto associated only with the kibbutzim and moshavim.

This base was most visible in the struggle against the infiltrators – foreign political and economic refugees from Africa – whom Regev called, “a cancer in the body of the nation” – a standard hateful and xenophobic strategy under the definition of populism offered by Cas Mudde and others. However, the infiltrators were useful to Netanyahu in three complementary ways. Firstly, they helped to mobilize his base among the disenfranchised, the poor largely Mizrahi population of South Tel Aviv. Secondly, they helped establish the bond between leader and people that cast Netanyahu as the savior of the people: the one chosen by the people to defend them by building the wall and deporting or incarcerating infiltrators. Thirdly, they provided a justification to attack institutions within Israel that could be portrayed as working against the national interest in favor of this enemy “other.” These included the courts and civil rights organizations, the New Israel Fund in particular, concerning which Netanyahu produced a Facebook post on his own page stating: “The fund’s ultimate goal is to erase the Jewish character of Israel and turn it into a state of ‘all its citizens,’ alongside a Palestinian nation-state clean from Jews, on the ‘67 borders with Jerusalem as its capital … the activity of the New Israel Fund, endangers the security and the future of the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Human rights organizations were framed as traitors trying to help illegal infiltrators and working to erase the Jewish character of the state and threatening the people with the establishment of a hostile Palestinian state on Israel’s borders. By the same token, the left was also framed as an enemy of the Jewish nation and juxtaposed against the national coalition of the Jewish people, its leader in the form of Netanyahu, and even God Himself. This narrative was evident during the 2015 campaign when it was claimed that “Arabs are going to vote in droves” and that the left coalition, civil rights organizations, and the courts were defending the enemies of the nation (Arabs, illegal infiltrators, etc.).

1. The ultra-Orthodox – The Holy Alliance

Just before the 2021 election, Netanyahu had asked his “natural partners” on the right to, once again, sign a pledge of loyalty to his government alone. It read: “We, heads of parties signed, are committed to establishing a shared government to materialize the unique opportunity to establish a true right-wing government.”[[13]](#footnote-13) MK Miki Zohar, chairperson of Netanyahu’s coalition reiterated: “uniting the right-wing bloc is important for the victory of the Right. We were and remain united; no one would drive us apart. In the name of God, we would act together for the people of Israel. The land of Israel and the Bible of Israel.”[[14]](#footnote-14) (Only this time, none of the “natural partners,” –not even the extreme Religious Zionist Party – signed up.) How did the ultra-Orthodox parties remain the last standing partners loyal to Netanyahu? Zohar’s declaration exposes the kernel of the answer: Netanyahu “Judified” the nationalist camp – the religious triangle of people, land, and religion in the name of God. It became the official collective identity of the Israeli right wing. The Jewish people, far removed from the secular-national-universalistic notion of the people under Labor, was now united under God. Not only that, there was no mention of the State of Israel– only the holy triangle of people, land and religion.

The political turning point goes back to the decision by Tsippi Livni, leader of Kadima after Ehud Olmert’s resignation as Prime Minister, to let Netanyahu form a government following the 2009 election.in which Kadima won the largest bloc of votes. Ultimately, her gambit failed, as the ultra-Orthodox helped catapult Netanyahu into power. The ultra-Orthodox parties have always played the role of pivot parties in Israeli politics, willing to go with the highest bidder to establish coalitions serving their narrow interests.[[15]](#footnote-15) Over the last 25 years, Shas, for example, has only twice sat in the opposition, and each time for only two years. In every other government it has formed part of the coalition and, indeed, was the kingmaker, the “king” in this case being Netanyahu. In 2008, Livni was asked by Shas to give the party 600 million shekels as part of the coalition agreement. This ran counter to Kadima’s platform, but Livni agreed.[[16]](#footnote-16) Upon going to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef to finalize the deal, Eli Yishai, Shas leader and Minister of Interior Affairs, announced that he had already signed up with Bibi, and that Netanyahu had committed to a future coalition, not just for the interim but until the next elections. Yishai disclosed that it was not only a question of money, saying, “had she put a more right-wing line, I wouldn’t have ruled her out.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Shas thus shifted from being a classic pivot party to a core right-wing party and, despite the promise of more funds from Livni than Netanyahu could offer, chose Netanyahu because of his right-wing agenda. Yishai insisted on two issues: Jerusalem (meaning no negotiations with the Palestinians), and a hardline stance toward infiltrators Thus began the holy alliance between Shas and Likud. Shas had swung all the way to the extreme right, with its stance that African immigrants were “a real threat to the Jewish state” as Yishai argued.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Signing a coalition agreement before an election had even taken place was a political innovation of Netanyahu. He used this mechanism in 2009 to return to power after a decade in the political wilderness and harnessed it again in the 2015 election. This was a symbolic moment, signaling the death of the ultra-Orthodox parties as swing parties and their resurrection as intrinsic parts of the nationalist camp. While Peres’ dirty trick back in 1989 was built on a secret alliance with the ultra-Orthodox parties to oust Shamir from power (the only time that a government in Israel was removed from power by a vote of no confidence) another dirty trick, 25 years later, failed before it could get off the ground. Yair Lapid, Minister of Finance under Netanyahu’s government, this time a rare coalition with no ultra-Orthodox parties, legislated draconian economic cuts to ultra-Orthodox budgets, which were labeled by Shas and Aguda Israel as “Lapid’s decree.” However, in 2014, Lapid was secretly trying to bring the ultra-Orthodox parties into the fold and remove Netanyahu from power in return for dropping the decrees.[[19]](#footnote-19) Alas, Yakov Litzman, head of Aguda, went straight to Netanyahu, with whom he signed a coalition agreement for the next election in 2015. Lapid and his ministers were immediately dismissed from the government. The 2015 right-wing government was also the first government in which an Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox politician, Litzman accepted a ministerial position, reflecting their belated recognition of the authority of the state of Israel. The climax came when Litzman, representing the government at a memorial ceremony for IDF soldiers on Independence Day in 2016, declared: “our enemies did not distinguish between ultra-Orthodox and secular, Ashkenazi and Sepharadi, right and left, Olim (Jewish immigrants) and veterans. All of us, all the sons of our people, share a common fate.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The people of Israel –ultra-Orthodox included– share a common destiny. The antiZionist ultra-Orthodox community, which refuses to send its sons to the IDF, was now standing side by side with Israeli soldiers, saying prayers over the dead in the name of the Jewish state.

The most fundamental shift in the idea of the Jewish people that occurred, however, was the “Western Wall compromise.” Representing the reform and conservative Jewish congregations to which the majority of American Jews belong, the American NGO, Women of the Wall, had been conducting mixed prayers at the southern end of the Western Wall for a number of years and the historic compromise, passed in January 2016, mandated that non-Orthodox denominations would be allowed to pray at the Wall in accordance with their own beliefs and traditions.[[21]](#footnote-21) Ultra-Orthodox ministers in the government objected, but did not use their veto to block it. Indeed, they had been part of the planning process behind the scenes. However, it did not take long for those same ultra-Orthodox ministers to succumb to pressure from their rabbis and ultra-Orthodox media that launched an attack on the compromise. Netanyahu, despite the fact that the compromise had been passed by the government, decided to abandon the it and risk a severe rift with the largest Jewish community in the world. The ultra-Orthodox won the battle concerning the brand of Jewishness that the state of Israel endorsed, notwithstanding the threat to Israel’s relationship with American Jewry. Netanyahu, throughout the years, would succumb to the ultra-Orthodox on all major matters to do with religion in the Israeli public arena: from the appointment of city rabbis and judges in the Jewish courts, to allowing ultra-Orthodox control not just of the Ministry of Religion, but also the Ministry of Interior Affairs which, in effect, gave them the power to determine “who is a Jew.” Rhetorically asking, “Why do I go with the right?” MK Gafni of the Aguda Israel party answered, “because the traditional public is on the right. I am connected to the traditional public… and –what can one do– they are on the right.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

1. Revolutionary Conservatism: Undoing the Secular-National Zionist Revolution

On the face of it, the Israeli nationalist camp is an exemplary form of conservatism, particularly Anglo-American conservatism. The political order and institutions on which conservatism is based, according to Ofer Haivry and Yoram Hazony, two of the recent founding fathers of Israeli conservatism, are nationalism, religious tradition, the Bible, and the family.[[23]](#footnote-23) This is traditional Anglo-American conservatism with an Israeli spin, but it is important to note that there was no traditionally conservative political movement in Israel prior to the 2000s. This new form of conservatism is at best, a revolutionary ethnonational ethos,[[24]](#footnote-24) an invented “tradition” that claims to be rooted in preexisting ideological currents and that presents itself as part of a pedigreed political tradition. However, while Likud now proudly calls itself conservative, it has become is rooted in nationalism, liberalism, and revisionism; not conservatism.[[25]](#footnote-25) The national-religious movement revolutionized itself after the Six-Day War and invented an ideology that transformed Israeli politics based on the idea of the redemption of Eretz Israel. It is, however, a young ideological creed. The invention of a conservative movement in Israel, and its phenomenal success in reconceptualizing the political discourse and the major ideological axis of the Left-right continuum into conservatism vs. liberalism was a masterful modern trick. At the helm of this development were political agents but, also, behind-the-scenes American-funded think-tanks and NGOs which became extremely influential as Netanyahu’s power and influence increased.[[26]](#footnote-27)

Yet “indigenous” conservatism, even as an imported tradition, was a fundamental development in Israeli politics. In Freeden’s terms, conservatism itself is a thin-centered ideology that defines itself constantly against the idealist and revolutionary movements of the day.[[27]](#footnote-28) In fact, constantly inventing and re-inventing conservatism is an innate feature of conservatism for “its perceived enemies change contingently over time: classical liberals, welfare liberals, socialists, fascists, communists… The result is thus a structural mirror-image reaction.[[28]](#footnote-29) In the Israeli context, however, it had no political tradition to latch onto, and thus invented itself as a tradition with no actual roots. Yet, the import was successfully assimilated into the political body of the emerging nationalist camp.

First, the holy trinity – people, land, religion – was at the core of the new conceptualization of the Jewish people, with the national-religious, Mizrahi traditionalists, and ultra-Orthodox communities forming natural partners in this nationalist camp led by Netanyahu. This traditionalist ethnoreligious bloc was also conservative in its outlook – connected to rabbis, religion, tradition and respect for authority. It was identified both with the Jewish nation, founded on Biblical notions of nation-as-religion, and the Jewish family, justifying both the Law of Return, citizenship laws, and policies for Jewish demographic and geographic expansion such as “Judifying” the Negev and the Galilee, not to mention Judea and Samaria.

Second, conservatism was brought into Israeli politics by importing the professional distinction between activist vs. formalist judges. This was translated into liberal vs. conservative. Ayelet Shaked, Minister of Justice under Netanyahu, was particularly proud of her mission to appoint conservative judges. Conservative judges were defined as nationalists, right-wingers, often national-religious, and pro-settlements, if not settlers themselves. They were juxtaposed to activist, liberal, pro-universal rights judges. The key to this conservatism is a counter-revolution against what the nationalist camp sees as the constitutional revolution led by Supreme Court President Aharon Barak. Shaked explained: “the Israeli judges used the ‘live constitution’ concept – but without having a constitution. At the same time as the court expanded the constitutional definition of Israel as a democratic state, it reduced the constitutional definition of Israel as a Jewish state. It interpreted its democraticness as essential while its Jewishness as technical.”[[29]](#footnote-30) Thus, while the Anglo-American distinction is between equality and liberty, Shaked’s conservative judges were not pro-liberty but pro-nationalist, and equality was designated as the enemy of Zionism. Likud member Yariv Levin disclosed: “The most difficult struggle I led concerned the fact that the law includes no mention of equality, and of ‘Jewish and democratic.’ I, of course, accept the individual equality principle, but it was explicitly clear that if we had written it in, the Supreme Court’s interpretation would have nullified its meaning.”[[30]](#footnote-31) “Equality” and “democracy” were seen as the core values protected by the liberal court and, therefore, “Jewish” and “nation-state” were the main concepts insisted upon in this struggle to overturn the constitutional revolution. Shaked explains: “the question of demography and Jewish majority are classic examples. The Israeli ruling of the courts does not perceive them as values to be considered… The Jewish majority question is not relevant in any way.”[[31]](#footnote-32) It is not merely Judaism, but the Jewish majority which becomes a prime value under conservatism. Concerning her role as Justice Minister, Shaked concluded: “In my time the constitutional regime in Israel changed, it became more balanced and more conservative. More conservative judges were integrated into the system. Regulation has substantially decreased, something in the discourse has changed.”[[32]](#footnote-33) The political discourse has certainly changed: it moved from liberalism being a consensus of the party system, with the Likud party’s roots indeed originating in the Liberty party (Herut), to liberalism being identified with the center-left and the right endorsing nationalist conservatism.

Third, the identification of the Supreme Court with human rights meant that the conservative camp has gradually become hostile to human rights. It adopted from Anglo-American tradition of conservatism the idea of rights and duties,[[33]](#footnote-34) to such an extent that basic rights like citizenship were conditional upon loyalty to Israel as a Jewish state. Once the “deep state” argument took hold of the nationalist discourse and Netanyahu’s hostility towards perceived gatekeepers – the judicial system, the police, the civil service and the media – grew, so too did the discourse become more anti-liberal and illiberal. Nationalistic ethnoreligious populism took hold of the right wing and loyalty was demanded as proof of patriotism.

1. **Governability**

Officials who try to rule the country against those chosen by the people – this is undemocratic (Shlomo Karhi on Twitter, July 16, 2020.).

In a parliamentary democracy, in which the ministers are elected to their posts not because of their profession or expertise, but because of their ranking in the primaries or loyalty to the prime minister, the civil service is thought to be the professional arm of the ministry. However, under Netanyahu’s 2015–2019 government, as enshrined in its coalition agreement, an attempt was made to politicize all the senior civil servant positions.[[34]](#footnote-35) Political appointments based on ideological or personal loyalty replaced expertise and professional appointments. How was loyalty connected to national-conservatism? Just as Avigdor Lieberman had demanded the loyalty of non-Jews to Israel as a Jewish state; just as Shaked demanded the judges she appointed be loyal to her conservative ideology, so too did Netanyahu demand complete loyalty to himself as Prime Minister. The parties in the nationalist camp had to sign a loyalty pledge before and after the elections; senior civil servants were required to pledge complete loyalty to him personally; and every member of the nationalist camp who criticized Netanyahu or left the party was declared disloyal, a traitor and a “leftist.”

Loyalty became the defining feature of what was expected of the civil service, but the hostility towards state workers, and the demand to change the relationship between the political and professional ranks, entailed a tacit accusation that “professionalism” was merely a disguise for holding liberal views. Shaked argued: “We often witness clerks imposing a political agenda under the guise of professionalism and neutrality, and fighting, presumably, in the name of those values, to thwart government initiatives as if they were sitting on the opposition bench and seeking to create an alternative regime.”[[35]](#footnote-36) The Netanyahu government worked under the assumption that professionalism was just a smokescreen for a political stance. The two opposing ideologies differed in their views of democracy. In the liberal democratic view, civil servants are public trustees. They are loyal to the rule of law and to public interest. In national-conservative ideology, the only public trustees are those chosen by the public through elections – the MKs and especially the ministers; the civil service practices “the rule of the officials” and looks after its own interests. It is therefore crucial that the minister appoints to all senior roles in the ministry those who are personally loyal to him.

**Table x: Civil Service within a Worldview**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Parliamentary Democracy** | **Deep State Argument** |
| Public trustees | Loyalty to minister |
| Public interest | Political interest |
| Rule of law | Party line |
| Professional appointments  | Personal appointments |
| Civil service as gatekeepers  | “Rule of the officials” |

The hostility towards state-mechanisms was even stronger because it emanated from the neoliberal creed that subordinates the rights of the individual to market forces. Politics reflects the collective will of the people; the market enshrines the interests of the individual. Liberalism was pushed into the free market and away from politics. What was rejected as a constitutive concept in the national arena, found refuge in the economic one. Neoliberalism – anti-regulation, anti-state-intervention – was translated into the idea of governability. Rolling the state back was the prime mission of neoliberals. The civil service represented everything that is “bad” about statism: bureaucracy, regulations, lack of management skills, unprofitability, mediocracy, and incapacity for reform. The mediating force between neoliberalism and governability was New Public Management. Netanyahu’s metaphor of the fat and thin man – the first representing the civil servant and the latter the market entrepreneur – provided the rationale for cutting taxes and funding to the public sector. Netanyahu worked with small loyal teams that acted without consulting or even notifying the professional ranks in the ministries. This was the case in terms of the UN outline on infiltrators, the sale of submarines to Egypt, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Abraham Accords and many other policy items in which he bypassed civil servants, experts, and ministers and worked directly through hand-picked loyal teams. The justification was the “deep state” argument that state mechanisms were being held captive by civil servants who served not the public or the government, but their own interests or the political interest of the elites in power as opposed to the representatives chosen by the people incarnated by the government. Governability thus encompassed both the neoliberal creed – efficiency, profit-orientation, management-led, and anti-public sector – and national-conservative principles of loyalty, acting on behalf of those winning elections, and accusing the bureaucracy of harboring political views and sustaining elitist democracy.

1. Popular Democracy

“The people’s decision is clear” declared Netanyahu just before the final results of the 2020 elections were announced “the right-wing Zionist camp has 58 mandates. The left-wing Zionist camp, together with Lieberman who united with them, has 47 mandates. The Joint List, which slanders IDF soldiers and resents the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and definitely resists me as a Prime Minister who promotes our sovereignty in the homeland’s territories of the state of the Jewish nation – of course cannot be brought into this equation. And this was the will of the people.”[[36]](#footnote-37) Israel was no longer a democratic state for all its citizens. The *demos* was now defined exclusively as Zionist and Jewish and the will of the people clearly supported the nationalist right-wing camp. Arab citizens, casting their votes, were marginalized. Jewish majoritarianism was the will of a people standing behind a powerful leader promoting Jewish sovereignty in the Biblical Jewish homeland. The will of the people became the basic value of democracy and this was exclusively the will of the Jewish people.

In contrast to the traditional checks and balances designed to ensure equilibrium in the organs of the state, the national-conservative government propagates rule by the people as a strictly defined ethnoreligious group. The government, not being elected directly by the people and being represented by only those loyal ministers appointed by the Prime Minister, is conceived of as the agent of the will of the people. In this conception of the relationship between state and government, winning a majority means that the government is entitled to override the courts; to be free from judicial review, and not to be beholden to constitutional principles. Shaked argued that the courts’ rulings completely ignore the Jewish majority as a factor: “The question of the Jewish majority is irrelevant… and all in the name of individual rights.”[[37]](#footnote-38) The interests of the Jewish majority are placed in opposition to human rights as a universal value. The foundational value of democracy is the inviolability of individual rights but, in national-conservative rhetoric, the courts and the process of judicial review, with its focus on human rights, were represented as frustrating the right of the Jewish majority to rule Israel as a majoritarian state. The will of the people reflected in the election of the nationalist camp removes Arab Israeli citizens from the equation entirely.

This erasure is reflected in the demand for loyalty to Israel as the Jewish state, which became a condition for citizenship. Lieberman’s slogan, “No Citizenship without Loyalty,” is the foundation of the rights-obligations discourse. Rights are not free nor universal. Rather, rights and duties, replace civil rights as basic framework of democracy. It emanates from Netanyahu’s “will give will receive” slogan, vis-à-vis the Palestinians, but it also was reflected in the discourse of Yesh Atid and Jewish Home that people who serve in the army and pay taxes deserve more rights than others.

The people have chosen their leader and he is, therefore, the state incarnate, commanding complete loyalty from coalition parties, his ministers, and the people. The elites persecute Netanyahu, as the representative of the people: “They do whatever they can to get rid of me and thereby perpetuate the rule of the Left… against the will of the voters, the majority of whom are right-wingers.”[[38]](#footnote-40) The majority of the Jewish people chose Netanyahu, and it is the people that are being persecuted by the left for their choice: “Bibi, they don’t just want to take you down, they want to take us down, all of us, the Likud and the nationalist camp… they know they can’t defeat us in the polling booth, so they try to bypass democracy and take us down without elections.”[[39]](#footnote-41) In this view of popular democracy, the leader represents the will of the people and democracy must be free from all mediating institutions –opposition parties, the civil service, rule of law, and the courts. In this conceptual framework, there is only direct democracy in which the leader is elected and government governs independently, paying no heed to the official bureaucracy of state. The key institution is the government, which is presented as directly representing the people’s will. Of course, the government – the ministers – are chosen by the prime minister and owe their loyalty to him, regardless of the support they received in the primaries. Needless to say, in Israeli elections, neither the prime minister nor his ministers are directly chosen by the people. The government demands supreme power over the courts and the Knesset. In all the overriding clause suggestions coming from Levin, Shaked or Smotrich, as Chapter 6 showed, it was a simple majority that overrode the Supreme Court’s rulings: not an overall majority of 70 or 65 MKs – a majority that would represent the whole of the Knesset – but a regular majority of just 61, meaning just the coalition. The government, led by the Prime Minister, becomes the main institution in popular democracy and all mediating institutions are deplored as jeopardizing its ability to govern and working against the will of the people. Tyranny of the majority comes to mind. In this kind of democracy, checks and balances are reduced to the minimum and pure power of the government, representing the Jewish majority, can override any court ruling of unconstitutionality or anti-democratic. The protection of minorities and citizens is reduced in the name of preserving the Jewish character of the nation. Collective identity overrides individual rights.

Thus, the core tenets of national-conservative populism are: the Jewish people; counter-constitutional Zionist revolution; governability based on neoliberal anti-statist ethos and loyalty; popular democracy based on a majoritarian notion of electoral choice; rights and obligations, and the idea that the elected leader and his government embody the will of the people.

1. **Structural Changes: Jewish Majority, Governability, Paradigm Shift**

The evolution of national conservatism under Netanyahu’s government in Israel is unique because the ideology evolved while the nationalist camp was been in power. Far from the changes being limited to the realm of the conceptual, some fundamental structural changes occurred. Crucially, these did not entail mere changes of policy or legislation, as in the case of other governments, but, rather, structural changes to the constitutional framework of the country, the practice of government rule, foreign policy paradigms, public media, and the very foundation of ideas of national identity in Israel. The structural changes thus transformed the nature of Israel’s democratic process in its entirety. I considered these shifts in the three parts of the book – constitutional design, governability, and the policy paradigm.

1. Constitutional Design– The Zionist Anti-Constitutional Revolution

Trust in the Supreme Court, which until the 1990s ranked highest after the IDF across the board, has declined substantially over the last two decades. In 2004, more than 80% of the Jewish population expressed trust or very high trust in the Supreme Court.[[40]](#footnote-42) In 2008, just before Netanyahu returned to power, this percentage had declined to 50%, rising again with the social protest movement of 2011–2012 to 75%, and since then declining steadily to reach just 52% in 2020. Yet the true story of the polarization of the Israeli society, and the narrative of Netanyahu’s era, is embedded in the difference in the results between the center-left and the right. In 2020, 84% of the left and 70% of the center expressed very high trust or substantial trust in the Supreme Court, whereas only 38% of the self-identified right in Israel expressed trust in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court was at the center of the delegitimizing attack on Israeli liberal democracy.

**Table x: Trust in the Supreme Court by political camp 2003-2020 (Jews):**

 **Right (Green) Center (purple) Left (red).[[41]](#footnote-43)**



The centerpiece of the nationalist camp’s constitutional redesign prior to Netanyahu’s return to power was the addition of Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty (1992) and Basic Law: Freedom of Occupation (1994) to the country’s list of basic laws which, in the Israeli legal system, essentially, takes the place of a formal constitution. The courts took the liberty of providing super-constitutional status for these laws, including the authority to declare null and void legislation that contradicts them. Simcha Rothman, MK of the Religious Zionist party, in his book entitled “Bagatz (the Supreme Court) Party,” explains, “Israel today is not a state that has a court, but a court that has a state. The courts system, and not Israeli government, de facto runs national policy on immigration, security, religion and state, the war against terror and other issues… The role reversal between the (executive and judicial G.T.) authorities is thought provoking and emphasizes that in many senses the Supreme Court has turned into an alternative government.”[[42]](#footnote-44)

The liberal “agenda” of the Supreme Court came under attack from the nationalist camp. However, the historical narrative posing this struggle between left and right is of course wrong. The government which enacted the Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty was a right-wing government led by Likud’s Shamir and Dan Meridor as the Justice Minister. The third piece of legislation, part of these basic laws, was Basic Law: Legislation which was to determine the superiority of the Bill of Rights over other legislation and the role of the Supreme Court through judicial review in overriding laws which contradict the bill of rights. Only the ultra-Orthodox, together with Shimon Peres, engineered a vote of no confidence and the government fell. The pressure from the religious and ultra-religious parties was such that there was no majority to legislate this law, as was enshrined in the coalition agreement of the new all-right Shamir government. The power engine behind the earlier Basic Laws did not come from the left: it was the liberal forces within Likud and the center-right parties with the cooperation of the left. The objection came from the religious and ultra-Orthodox parties. The ideological struggle was not between left and right but within the right: the liberal right against the illiberal, conservative right. The latter won out under Netanyahu’s regime.

The national-conservative right wanted nothing less than a counter-revolution: “Only a moral and political revolution in the order of what we experienced in the 1990s, one that would reenforce the achievements of Zionism and its central positions since its inception, could overturn this problematic trend.”[[43]](#footnote-45) Shaked, Minister of Justice, explained that the Basic Law: Nation State would do exactly that by “providing a constitutional web that includes, side-by-side with individual rights, national constitutional foundations for the state of Israel. It fulfills the concept ‘Jewish State’ precisely with that content that the constitutional revolution has deprived it of.”[[44]](#footnote-46)

Basic Law: Nation State is the jewel in the nationalist camp’s crown. The mission was not to create a declarative basic law, like Ruth Gavison had recommended, but to produce an effective counter to Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty. For this national constitutional redesign, it was crucial for Levin and Ohana, the senior Likud ministers who designed the discussions in the parliamentary committee and the final wording of the law, that the words “equality” and “Jewish and democratic” did not appear; [[45]](#footnote-47) only “Jewish nation-state.” They did not want the court to have an equality clause to fall back on, but wanted to establish the clear superiority of the Jewish nation over the democratic state. As Chapter 2 demonstrated, there is no other democracy in the world that has a national clause in the constitution and does not mention equal citizens’ rights and, usually, minority rights in the same clause. [[46]](#footnote-48) Benny Begin suggested to the committee that the law be phrased such that it reiterates the decades-old public consensus that “Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people with equal rights for all its citizens.” However, this consensus was eroded by Netanyahu’s government. As for the balance between the two basic laws, at least for the judicial experts of the national-conservative camp, there was no controversy that the newest basic law overrides the older one. According to Diskin and Vinitsky, there was no need to explicitly stipulate that the Nation-State Law overrides other laws, because a newer law always takes precedence over older basic laws. The constitutional counter-revolution, from the perspective of the right-wing experts, was well on its way.

A complementary structural change in the new constitutional design, ensuring the national-conservative interpretation of the basic laws, and adopting a formalist, anti-interventionist and anti-activist agenda, was the appointment of 330 sympathetic judges by Shaked under Netanyahu’s government. Summing up her own revolution in the Justice Ministry she proudly describes how they “…broke the thought monopoly by appointing six judges to the supreme court and 330 judges to all courts. The courts today are more diverse, more representative and more balanced.” Establishing her 100 day plan for her next term of office she set the goal of changing the appointment process of judges, not just in practice, but also transforming the system itself. She commented, “It is time to speak of changing the system. My first move would be to change the way judges are appointed. In most democracies, politicians choose judges, it is impossible that judges have a right of veto over the choice of their colleagues.”[[47]](#footnote-49) Thus, we witness a well-structured, well-designed counter-revolution, adopting a systemic view of how to change the constitutional design of Israel. The next steps – legislating the override clause, changing the system of appointing judges so that politicians would choose them according to their political agenda, and providing for the overriding of individual rights in cases of national interest – were the goals of Yamina, the Zionist Religious party, the ultra-Orthodox parties, and Likud in the 2021 campaigns. Whether Israel has changed, under this constitutional restructuring, from a liberal democracy to an illiberal democracy, or merely transformed from an embedded democracy to a defective democracy, time will tell.[[48]](#footnote-50)

1. Government above All – Governability and Principles of Right-Wing Rule

The governability law, passed by the Knesset on July 31, 2013 raised the electoral threshold from 2% to 4%. This was ostensibly designed to limit new small parties from running for elections and improve the stability of the multi-party system, but it was actually mainly intended to disempower Arab parties, as it was these parties that had barely passed the 2% threshold and were represented in the Knesset. In future elections, Ra’am-Ta’al with 4 MKs, Balad with 3 MKs and Hadash with 4 MKs were all highly unlikely to pass the new 4% threshold. In the discussion at the Knesset, the Arab MKs used their one minute of reaction to the law to stand silently, with masking-tape on their lips, to symbolize the racial marginalization represented by the new governability law.[[49]](#footnote-51) The spirit of governability did not end with the electoral threshold. Netanyahu, for his part, had spearheaded major electoral changes in the hope of remaining Prime Minister during his trial, even with no clear majority emerging over the four elections cycles between 2019–2021. Netanyahu invented the two rotating Prime Ministers idea and legislated the establishment of a national unity government between him and Gantz, ensuring that he would enjoy the status of a Prime Minister after the rotation in the event that Gantz became Prime Minister first. This was not to be. He also hoped to have a majority to have direct elections for Prime Minister only when the results of the 2021 elections reflected, yet again, a tie between his nationalist camp and his rivals.[[50]](#footnote-52)

Yet the main changes in the idea and practice of governability came in the realm of the relationships between the political and professional ranks of the civil service. The main argument was that, despite the fact that the Likud had been the governing party since 1977, the right does not actually rule, as the unelected officials and clerks, judges and journalists, control the mechanisms of democracy and prevent the true representatives of democracy –the ministers – from practicing their public mandate.[[51]](#footnote-53) Just as the liberal-conservative dichotomy was imported from the United States, so, too, was the idea of replacing the entire senior public service by political appointments adopted from presidential political systems. The change in the corridors of power, in the ministries that determine policy outcomes and implement legislation, was explained by Avi Licht, Deputy General Attorney in the following terms: “over the last few years, our role, and the thrust of our activity as gatekeepers, promoting public interest and human rights, are perceived by growing audiences – including the Knesset and the government – as illegitimate. A new ideological attitude rose that argues that what we do is forbidden. In essence, it asks: “Who put you in charge?”[[52]](#footnote-54) Licht, one of the most dominant judicial advisors, in charge of major reforms like gas, media and the insolvency law, stood no chance of being promoted under Shaked’s Justice Ministry and resigned. This was the result of the most draconian law that sought to politicize the civil service – the law of legal advisors. Supreme Judge Rubinstein commented: “What the bill proposes is an outright politicizing of legal advising to the government. A legal advisor is not a position of confidence. Under no circumstances is it that…. His job does not depend on ‘loyalty’ to minister so and so, who in our country tends to get replaced rather frequently, but on loyalty to the law.”[[53]](#footnote-55) The bill passed the Governmental Ministries Committee, but the elections delayed its passage in the Knesset. The spirit of this law – doing away with professionalism and the idea of public interest, accusing all the officials of promoting “liberal” and “leftist” agendas, and preventing the ministries from changing policies, reflected the dominant atmosphere under Netanyahu’s rule. Professionalism and neutrality, Shaked argued, were the guise behind which officials could promote their own agendas.[[54]](#footnote-56) The hostility of the politicians and the ministers towards the civil servants in governmental offices changed the ethos, the effectiveness, and the appeal of the civil service.

Amir Ohana, Miri Regev and Israel Katz, the three most loyal ministers in Netanyahu’s government, launched an uncompromising attack, not just on the officials in their own ministries, but Ohana, as Justice Minister, attacked the judicial system, the Attorney’s Office and the judges, and, as Minister of Internal Security, the police and its chiefs. Regev, as Minister of Culture, took the cultural elites to task, accusing them of being hostile to her and the government. [[55]](#footnote-57) Regev, as Chapter 4 demonstrated, changed policies, not just the rhetoric of the elites against the people. She distinguished between freedom of expression and freedom of funding, in order to justify endowing only those institutions loyal to the Jewish state from the state budget. She also funded popular films and music shows, devising a policy of “wisdom of the crowd” funding initiatives, meaning that only if a film achieved box office success, would it receive funds retroactively. Such an initiative gave priority to films that reflected public tastes, at the expense of political films appealing to the artistic tastes of the official reviewers and disseminating anti-Israeli propaganda abroad.[[56]](#footnote-58) Loyalty was thus embedded into budgeting policies. Government funds were distributed to local authorities without quality assurances. Popular culture became the project of the anti-cultural-elite minister. Israel Katz, as Finance Minister, was a loyal follower of Netanyahu and distributed six billion shekels, against the advice of all economists and professionals in the ministry, because this is what Netanyahu wanted. No criteria, no discussion, no justifications. The leader was chosen by the people and he would do what he saw fit for the people, regardless of professional stances. The mechanisms of critique, of checks and balances and of public discussion were eroded. Gatekeepers were deplored as promoting their own political agendas. The concept of public interest was derided as a justification used by the bureaucracy to work against the ministers. Under this culture of governability, the professionals –judges, officials, journalists– were dragged into the political struggle. Personal accusations were levelled against the chief of police, the attorney general, the state attorney –all appointed by Netanyahu. Complete loyalty was demanded or you could be declared a traitor, a leftist, and anti-patriotic.

1. Netanyahu Era: A Paradigm Shift – Foreign Policy and Public Media

I promise you that as prime minister, I will never gamble with the security of Israel… As prime minister of Israel, I will never let my people live under the shadow of annihilation.

( Benjamin Netanyahu, "Speech at Aipac," (2012).

Persecutor: How important was the media for Netanyahu?

Hefetz: “One cannot underestimate how crucial it was for him. Netanyahu is way beyond control-freak… His control over the media is not high but absolute. It is total… He was involved (in the media) at least as much as in security matters” (Testimony of Nir Hefetz against Netanyahu in the court, 22 November 2021).[[57]](#footnote-59)

The two major concerns that pre-occupied Netanyahu throughout his years in power and in which he instituted a paradigm shift were the Middle East geostrategic situation and Israeli public media.

1. Paradigm Shift: Palestinians at the Sidelines of History

In his foreign policy, Netanyahu, author of *A Place Under the Sun* and son of historian Ben-Zion Netanyahu, was guided by his core belief in the threat of a second Holocaust,[[58]](#footnote-60) and his conviction that only a determined policy from a power position would be effective against existential threats to Israel. After more than a decade in power, he also came to believe that, being in a league of his own, he was the only leader capable of keeping the Jewish nation safe. His threefold master plan was to focus on the Iranian threat, which reshaped Israel’s relationships with both the United States and the regional powers; to undermine the Palestinians as a viable force in the Middle Eastern geopolitical arena, and to use the association of Palestinians with terror organizations to disenfranchise Arab Israeli citizens, painting them as a fifth column aided by the unpatriotic left and, thereby, reshaping the internal political landscape of Israel. Painting the Iranian nuclear program as the new threat of annihilation for the Jews shifted the internal power-relations within the Middle East, and placed Israel and the moderate Sunni regimes on the same side. Once Trump unequivocally condemned Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism, the time was ripe for removing the Palestinian issue from the center of the Middle Eastern stage. As analyzed in Chapter 8, the narrative through which the Trump-Netanyahu alliance was forged was a religious one in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Land of Israel, in its entirety, belongs to the ancient Jewish people, as does its capital, Jerusalem. The Palestinians, refusing to accept this worldview, and rejecting the economic offer of 50 billion dollars, were pushed out of the new Middle East deal of the century. The significance of this moment for Netanyahu’s historical legacy was highlighted in his speech in Washington on 28 January 2020, in which he described Trump’s recognition of Israeli sovereignty over all Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria (small or large, legal or illegal) and the acceptance of the principle that Jews would never be removed, that is evacuated, from their homes ever again, the second greatest moment in the history of Israel. In Netanyahu’s estimation, it was second only to Ben-Gurion’s declaration of Israel’s independence. Netanyahu cast himself as one of the greatest leaders in modern Jewish history, on the same level as Ben-Gurion. However, this speech enraged even the pro-Israeli Trump administration which issued a resounding condemnation of this interpretation. In fact, the Abraham Accords built on another deal which stated that Israel would give up the idea of Jewish sovereignty, declared unilaterally (or with American support), in return for a security and economic alliance between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain. The settlers, flying with Netanyahu to Washington, condemned the retreat from the immediate annexation of the settlements and accused Netanyahu –as they did after the Bar-Ilan speech– of supporting the two-state solution.[[59]](#footnote-61) Netanyahu, however, was still assured that his grand plan was in place; he had achieved his ultimate goal of pushing the Palestinians to the sidelines of history.

The Trump administration was instrumental in magnifying Netanyahu’s standing in the world. He was called upon to mediate deals between distant states like Sudan, Morocco, the UAE and even the states of the Eastern European states of the Visegrád group, bypassing the European Union. In order to strengthen this new position, Netanyahu worked with Eastern European leaders such as Orbán and Morawiecki, building upon Islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiment shared by like-minded populist nationalists to try to achieve a new balance within the EU against the liberal bloc of Western European democracies. The new relationship took on a personal, economic, and military dimension. While anti-Islamic immigration policies became the symbol of his bond with Eastern Europe, evangelism was the glue binding Israel with right-wing Latin American leaders as discussed in Chapter 8. Bolsonaro, the nationalist leader of Brazil, but also Narendra Modi, the Hindu nationalist leader of India, and Orbán, the illiberal Hungarian leader, along with Trump and Vladimir Putin, were key figures that Netanyahu proudly presented to the Israeli public as his personal friends.[[60]](#footnote-62) This cemented his status as a statesman. The choice of these particular leaders was by no means coincidental. The personal connections were based on a shared ideological outlook. They were all right-wing, conservative, proud, nationalist, and populist leaders. National pride, patriotism, Islamophobia, and anti-immigration were their core shared values. One of their goals was to tip the scales against liberal democracy in their respective states. Liberalism, and especially equality, justice, civil rights organizations, and the media were designated as enemies of the people. Netanyahu has certainly left his historical mark on Middle-Eastern politics and economics. The joint military drills between the United States, Israel, Greece and UAE in April 2021 (with Egypt and Jordan as observers) were a clear signal to an increasingly aggressive Iran in the face of the prospect of greater instability in the region.[[61]](#footnote-63) This was a few months into Bennet’s government, a clear legacy of the paradigm shift authored by Netanyahu. Yet once both Trump and Netanyahu lost elections and relinquished power, it remains to be seen whether the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will remain on the sidelines of history.

While in the international arena, the mission of Netanyahu was to erase the Palestinians, on the home front, the “Palestinization” of Arab Israelis was a viable tool in the delegitimization of the Israeli left. Netanyahu’s September 2019 election campaign slogan read: “We cannot allow a left government that will rely on the Arabs that wants to exterminate us all and enable nuclear Iran that will annihilate us.”[[62]](#footnote-64) The identification of “bad Arabs” with fundamentalism and terror rubbed off on the image of the Arab citizens in Likud’s campaigns. The goal was the delegitimization of the left and the liberal discourse of human rights organizations; Arab Israelis were instrumental in that respect as they were the obvious “foe” in the anti-national coalition. However, as of 2018, they also become a potential deal-breaker in the party system deadlock. Two intertwined narratives became three. First was the “Arab voters are streaming in droves to polling stations. Leftist NGOs are bringing them in buses” on the 2015 election day. A classic national-conservative alleged incitement on which Meridor said: “This incitement against the Arabs ‘voting in droves’ – they are all citizens, but they can’t participate? This is a horrific thing that is happening to us, we have to stop it.” [[63]](#footnote-65) This symbolized the struggle within the right, between the liberal-national wing and illiberal conservative nationalism. Against it, was the reluctant endorsement of program 922 for the Arab community by Netanyahu. The rationale here was economic: economic growth can be achieved by investing in infrastructure serving the Arab community and raising their level of education and employment, producing a systemic change in the budget mechanism for the Arabs. The economic plan is the flip side of the conservative coin. But with it came pressure from hawkish members of government to strengthen “law and order” in the Arab sector, building police stations and demolishing illegally built houses. Thus, there were two ideological streams that conflicted within Netanyahu’s government: Gila Gamliel, Kahlon and Dery supported 922; Levin, Elkin, Regev and Akunis were against it. And the Prime Minister? While Netanyahu initiated the committee, he was resentful of the plan. The Finance Ministry President, Rivlin, and others, pushed for its approval. In his reluctance, Netanyahu sought to link the economic program with stringent measures against illegal structures in Arab villages. Two weeks after the program passed, 11 homes were destroyed in Qalansawe, and Umm El-Khiran was to suffer the same fate had it not been for a policeman that was killed in the riots against the demolition of homes there. The two narratives –economic growth based on investment in infrastructure, and a hardline against the Arab Israelis– both played a role in Netanyahu’s 2015–2019 government. However, a third possible scenario evolved in 2018. For the first time, the opportunity arose for the prime minister to divide the Joint List and rule with one of its parties– the Islamist party. This had some resonance with the national narrative, as the other parties were presented in the media and by Netanyahu’s people as propagating mainly the Palestinian state and supporting terror as a way of fighting Israel. But creating a differentiation on the basis of a social movement whose prime concern is the civic life of the Arab community, endowed Netanyahu with a potentially winning political card. Legitimizing Mansur Abbas, as Chapter 7 demonstrated, facilitated the idea of being inside the coalition but outside the government. This was a step further from Rabin’s minority government, which relied on Arab parties outside the coalition. This time, Netanyahu and Abbas concocted an option of full participation and support within the coalition. Alas, this political option was rejected by another one of Netanyahu’s creations– the quite possibly racist post-Kahana Religious Zionist party. It was Netanyahu who pushed Ben-Gvir, Kahana’s student, into Smotrich’s party. It was Ben-Gvir and Smotrich that objected vehemently to any support of the Islamist party in the national-conservative coalition. Still, it was the Netanyahu-Abbas connection that did, in the end, bring about a temporary end to the political impasse. However, Abbas was playing for the other team, and closed the deal with the Bennet-Lapid government. Netanyahu immediately fell back onto ethnonational incitement. In November 2021 Netanyahu accused Ra’am of passing on funds to Hamas in Gaza under Bennet’s government. A demonstration led by Netanyahu’s men had as its slogan “A budget with blood on its hands.”[[64]](#footnote-66) Once the superbly talented magician of Israel politics invents new tricks, others are quick to imitate him. For the first time ever, an Islamist party was part of a coalition, a coalition for change. One thing had definitely changed: the balance of power.

1. Netanyahu’s Quest for Media Dominance

The constitutional redesign reshaped the relationship between the executive, the legislative and the judicial arms of government. The attempt to curtail judicial review and to hobble the ability of the courts to rule against unconstitutional laws that violate citizen’s rights; the elevation of the nation-state over individual rights, and the focus on empowering the government in the name of the people under the banner of governability in order to neutralize any criticism were all intensified with the vilification of the public media during Netanyahu’s reign. News broadcasting, investigative journalism, critical analysis and public discussion are the essence of the media as the fourth arm of government. Netanyahu embedded distrust of the media into his deep state argument in a bid for total control. Chapter 9 revealed the love-hate relationship between Netanyahu and the media, and his obsession with it unfolding dramatically in the court as his trial progressed. Netanyahu understood that media determines the mindset, the framing, and the political consciousness of the public, and sought to control the different mechanisms of mediating the message to the people. The chapter exposed seven strategies that Netanyahu used to gain gradual control over the public media in Israel. His efforts were on all four levels: printed journalism, TV newsrooms, radio, and internet news websites, together with attempting to influence social media.

Netanyahu had a vision: he wanted to establish a news empire owned by media tycoons who shared his right-wing, nationalist-conservative worldview would provide him the means to design and control a pro-Bibi media all the while taking systemic steps to influence public media that was not exclusively “pro-Bibi.” He took comprehensive action in pursuit of this goal. The first strategy was to directly influence media tycoons to create something along the lines of Fox news media for himself in Israel as well as to manipulate the commercial news agents to either be more “balanced” or to have less news. The second strategy entailed attempting to appoint, or influence, CEOs and chief editors. The balancing act, importantly, was not concerned with greater diversity – say Mizrahi people or women – nor, indeed, was it even interested in securing more positions for right-wingers in the media. “Balancing” meant, specifically, inserting his own people, his army of pro-Bibi media people, as they often self-identified, into talk shows. The third strategy was to infiltrate the public media with pro-Bibi journalists, publicists, panelists or public intellectuals who directly supported him. These served as the cadre that would rotate between political jobs within the nationalist camp – often within the Likud party – the public media and the pro-Bibi channels. The fourth strategy was to launch direct attacks on journalists and to present them as an enemy of the people. In particular, to personally persecute investigative journalists and their programs, like Ilana Dayan’s *Fact* or Raviv Drucker’s *The Source*, or satirical programs like Lior Shlein’s *Back of the Nation*. The fifth strategy was to try to gain control over public media from within, be it radio, TV, print, or internet. This was done by attempts to gain full control over public media by appointing sympathetic CEOs and forcing them to employ pro-Bibi journalists, or threatening to shut down the stations should Netanyahu’s control be resisted. This is what happened with the Channel One and the Army radio. Threats to shut down, split or merge channels, were also instruments in Netanyahu’s power accumulation tool kit. The sixth strategy was to establish pro-Bibi media. The newspaper *Israel Hayom* was the first, but the establishment and use of Channel 20, Galei Israel Radio, *Makor Rishon*, i24, and Walla News and an attempt to take over the Knesset channel were all part of this association between like-minded tycoons, pro-Bibi media people, and public-like channels. The final strategy was to control the media by regulation, legislation, and through ministers of communication. Hefetz testifies to Netanyahu’s decision to appoint himself as Minister of Communication, in direct response to Elovitch’s demand for regulatory benefits, taken at the Netanyahu household at Balfour.[[65]](#footnote-67) In addition, Netanyahu appointed loyal ministers to the job and controlled their reforms and actions in the ministry. But his ultimate tool was concentrating media legislation in his hands – from the Yisrael HaYom bill to the attempt to manipulate the independent Kan public broadcast corporation and to try to force it to give up news broadcasting though legislation that was stopped only by the courts. The final tool was regulation: Netanyahu attempted to concentrate news broadcasting media regulation under one body under his personal control.

While his attempts to totally dominate the media may have only been partially successful, Netanyahu did certainly discredit the very idea of professional journalism. Professionalism is a smokescreen for political views, said Shaked, and Netanyahu was convinced that each and every critical journalist had an agenda against him. While his demand for a more diverse, pluralistic and representative media may have been well-phrased, for Netanyahu, diversity did not mean different social groups or political opinions; it meant pro-Bibi. The media people that gathered around him notoriously declared that they were not journalists. They used pseudo-journalism for a greater cause – to bring about political change and to fight against the media elites. They did not even pretend to be offering diverse, critical and investigative journalism. Whether professional journalism can be rescued in the post-Netanyahu era is yet to be seen. However, Netanyahu’s arrogance in assuming he could manipulate regulation in favor of tycoons in return for full control over his internet news website is now unfolding in the courts. The public media suffered a detrimental blow under Netanyahu’s long and destructive march through the institutions of power.

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