Israel's Political System

Israel is governed by a parliamentary democracy, in which seats in the 120 member legislative assembly, the Knesset, are assigned on the basis of nationwide proportional representation. Voters do not elect individual candidates, but vote for a closed list of candidates determined by each political party. Any party receiving more than 2% of the national vote is assigned a proportional number of seats in parliament, the seats assigned according to the candidate's position on the party slate. For example, if the party wins 10 seats, the first 10 candidates on the party slate will occupy those seats. Each parliament serves a four-year term, unless a majority of representatives agrees to dissolve the body and hold early elections. Most Knessets in Israel's history did not serve their full four years.

After parliamentary elections, the president selects as head of the government, or prime minister, the party leader believed to be most able to form a government (not necessarily the leader of the largest party). Prime Ministers are expected to serve a four-year term, which may be shortened by a vote of no confidence and the formation of a new government by a replacement candidate. If a replacement candidate cannot form a new government, the Knesset is dissolved and new elections are held.

Once confirmed by a simple parliamentary majority, the new prime minister has 45 days to fill cabinet positions. Because a party only needs to obtain 2% of the vote to gain a seat in the Knesset, no single party has ever won a parliamentary majority. The prime minister therefore is obligated to form a coalition government in order to cobble together the 61 seats needed for a parliamentary majority, and must offer cabinet positions and other incentives to members of smaller coalition partners who provide the necessary votes for a majority. These smaller parties, often on the periphery of Israeli politics, use this influence to further their political agendas, leaving the prime minister vulnerable to their demands, and creating a system where small, often single-issue parties wield disproportionate amounts of influence.

The five major Israeli parties are: Kadima ("Forward"), led by Tzipi Livni, a centrist party that strives to maintain a Jewish majority in Israel through a two-state solution for the conflict with the Palestinians; Likud, the center-right party, led by the current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu; Israel Beytenu ("Israel, Our Home"), a right-of-center party, founded by Avigdor Lieberman, which advocates a hard line toward the Palestinians and toward Israel's Arab citizens; The Labor Party, which supports a two-state solution and champions a social-democratic platform; and Shas, a party that represents mostly ultra-Orthodox Israeli Jews of Sephardic (Middle Eastern) descent and supports a more prominent role for religion in Israel.

The Knesset is the Legislative branch of Israel's government. It enacts laws, supervises government activities and is empowered to elect or remove the president of the State. It is separate from the Judicial branch of government, which includes both secular and religious courts. All judges are civil servants, required to uphold general law, and the High Court of Justice (HCJ) is the final appeals court for all secular and religious courts. The HCJ in Israel is active and tends toward greater intervention than other countries' Supreme Courts because Israel does not have a constitution.