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Israel-Hamas War and Israeli Domestic Politics

By Sarosh Bana

SYNOPSIS

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been facing intensive domestic pressure as his political opponents and public opinion in the country coalesced against his plan to change legal and judicial provisions and to stay in power. Hamas' surprise multi-prong attack on 7 October erupted so suddenly and violently as to give him another reason for dismay. But as the United States and Western countries rally around him, and as the Jewish state's attention focuses on destroying Hamas, Netanyahu is getting a respite from the internal political challenges he faces and may remain in leadership position longer than earlier expected.

COMMENTARY

For a leader whose public legitimacy has declined considerably in recent times, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may now be crafting his political and personal rehabilitation even as the Middle East edges towards a humanitarian catastrophe in his country's war with Hamas.

It may perhaps remain unclear why Hamas chose to launch its terror strikes on a vastly militarily superior Israel on 7 October that have killed thousands of civilians on both sides so far. Hamas would have expected a crippling counter-assault on Gaza by the most right-wing government in the 75 years since Israel's Declaration of Independence. Possibly, Hamas had intended to derail the Saudi-Israeli talks to normalise relations, which would have left the Palestinians even more isolated. But the facts may only be known when the dust finally settles after the ongoing war.

Allies Rally Around

The large influx of immigrants from war-stricken Muslim/Arab countries into the West in recent years has been rousing Islamophobia. Different strands of Western

intellectual and public opinion see in Israel the vanguard against the “spread of Islam”. Netanyahu has emerged as the torch-bearer of the campaign to limit the influence and growth of Islam.

It is noteworthy that the latest war with Hamas has brought the Western world rallying round Netanyahu. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, US President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Prime Ministers of the UK and Italy, Rishi Sunak and Giorgia Meloni, travelled one after the other to Israel to extend their unflinching support to Netanyahu.

Even as Israel’s Western allies, as also the United Nations, see the Israeli ground invasion of Gaza causing a colossal humanitarian crisis, Netanyahu seems intent as he devises the annihilation of Hamas despite the enormous collateral damage this might inflict. Israel’s order for residents of northern Gaza to evacuate to the south of the territory to escape its strikes on the north has already displaced a million people, and many of them are now returning to their homes since Israel is conducting a blitz against the south as well.

War a Respite from Domestic Troubles

Israel’s war with Hamas is being increasingly perceived as benefiting Netanyahu in that it has completely deflected public attention from the wide-ranging protests in Israel since the beginning of this year against his government’s new law that empowers the Israeli parliament, Knesset, to overturn decisions of the Supreme Court.

Opposition parties in Israel have protested vehemently and Israel’s President Isaac Herzog, in a rare intervention, called on Netanyahu and the ruling seven-party coalition to halt the divisive judicial changes “for the sake of the unity of the people of Israel, for the sake of responsibility”. The relentless protests also drew concern from the US and other allies of Israel.

The agitation flared even more in March this year when Netanyahu sacked Defence Minister Yoav Gallant for breaking ranks with the government on the issue of the contentious law. The decision to sack Gallant was rescinded three weeks later.

“I think we should refer to the situation not as a judicial overhaul, but as a regime coup”, leftist Hadash Party Parliamentarian Ofer Cassif told Al Jazeera newspaper. “Netanyahu wants to turn Israel from an ethnocracy – because Israel cannot be regarded as a democracy in the first place, based as it is on Jewish supremacy – but it’s going to be under the coup that the government wants to pursue; Israel is going to turn into a full-fledged fascist dictatorship”.

The wide-ranging protests threatened the survival of the nationalist-religious coalition of Netanyahu and his allies, which holds a slim majority in the Knesset, controlling 64 of 120 seats.

The government claimed its new law would restore balance between the judicial and executive branches and would rein in an interventionist court with liberal sympathies. However, the measure was widely seen as one to curb judicial activism as was the case when Netanyahu himself faced conviction in the 2019 cases of breach of trust,

fraud and acceptance of bribes in three separate scandals involving powerful media moguls and wealthy associates.

Not only has Netanyahu – Israel’s longest-tenured Prime Minister who has served an overall 16 years – risen above the protests as the Gaza fighting continues ferociously, he fully restored his writ as he succeeded in rallying rival parliamentary group leaders, Benny Gantz, Gadi Eizenkot, Gideon Sa’ar, Hili Tropper and Yifat Shasha-Biton, to join the emergency national unity government to fight the war with Hamas. Former Prime Minister Yair Lapid, who leads the largest opposition party in parliament, the centrist Yesh Atid, however, refused to join if the far-right Religious Zionist Party and Otzma Yehudit parties remained in it.

With most Israelis reviling the Hamas for starting the latest round of open armed conflict, Netanyahu finds support for his war effort that he otherwise would not have expected. He is the first Prime Minister to be born in independent Israel and is now serving a historic sixth term, but his extremist style of governance has made him deeply unpopular not only at home but worldwide; his public approval rating in Israel was at a low 27 per cent before the Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023.

Intractable Problems Remain

In its report of May this year to the UN Secretary-General, the UN General Assembly’s Economic and Social Council notes: “The reporting period saw the continuation of several overarching negative trends, including the continued absence of a political process to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the further entrenchment of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, a significant increase in violence and indiscriminate and targeted attacks against civilians on both sides, ongoing settlement activities, demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures, limited progress on advancing intra-Palestinian unity and the worsening of the financial crisis facing the Palestinian Authority”.

Amidst the brutal fighting in Gaza, Netanyahu seems to be rising like a phoenix from a war that he might consider opportune. This, however, is a temporary reprieve as he would no doubt be called upon after the war to account for his failure to prevent the Hamas attack, his insistence on funding and building up Hamas to rival the Palestinian Authority situated on the West Bank territory (so as to keep the Palestinians divided), and his attempt at introducing a divisive new law that caused so much public anger and protest, and which distracted the nation from its focus on defence, deterrence and security.

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