

Opinion With the nationalists in power, Israel needs a Jewish-Arab alliance

By Jo-Ann Mort

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's chauvinistic new Israeli government is a direct threat to democracy. But there is a countervailing trend in the country, that of a growing Arab middle class, and it offers hope for a different, more inclusive future — if Israel's opposition parties can come together to build Jewish-Arab political power.

Over the past few decades, the number of Arab citizens of Israel (meaning those who live within the 1967 Israeli borders, excluding East Jerusalemites) has grown to one-fifth of the population, and they are claiming their rightful place in Israeli society. Though they greatly lag behind Israeli Jewish citizens in employment and educational advantage and suffer naggingly high poverty numbers, there have been some important advances. The president of the country's largest bank is an Arab citizen. As reported by Haaretz in October 2021, there have been significant increases in the number of Arab physicians, dentists and pharmacists. Arabs number among the country's prominent law school deans, including at the flagship Hebrew University. Arab enrollment in the country's colleges and universities has almost doubled in the past decade, and the graduation rate for Arab students is approaching that of their Jewish counterparts. The student population at Technion, considered the MIT of Israel, is a bit more than 20 percent Arab.

Moreover, Arab citizens increasingly feel a part of Israel. In a 2019 Israel Democracy Institute poll, 65 percent of Arab respondents said they are proud to be Israelis (versus 92 percent of Jews). Other polls show that Arab citizens want political representation in the Israeli government and to participate in the political process. In a 2019 poll commissioned by The Post, 77.5 percent of the Arab public supported political participation. And should a separate Palestinian state emerge, Arab Israelis overwhelmingly want to remain Israelis, as polls and interviews have shown time and again.

Arab participation and turnout were critical in the recent election, in which, because of issues ranging from disappointment in the government to a split among the four Arab parties, Arab citizens of Israel voted at a 17 percent lower rate than Jewish Israelis. Had their turnout been higher, the election results surely would have been different.

Instead, the government has been taken over by an empowered Jewish nationalism. The previous “change” government, helmed by both Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, had included an Arab party — Ra’am — for the first time in decades. Netanyahu campaigned against this inclusion (despite his own prior outreach to the same party), denouncing the Arab parties for supporting terrorists and denying “Israel’s identity as the nation state of the Jewish people.”

In contrast to previous Netanyahu administrations, the new government is proposing diminished funding to the Arab sector and making employment for Arab teachers more difficult, while giving overwhelmingly preferential treatment to ultra-Orthodox Jews, such as excluding them from a core curriculum requirement in schools.

These moves should come as no surprise. The new minister of finance, Bezalel Smotrich, famously declared that he didn’t want his wife giving birth in a shared Jewish-Arab floor at Jerusalem’s flagship Hadassah Hospital or to be treated by an Arab doctor. The ultra-right-wing official Itamar Ben Gvir, the national security minister, has said that Jewish citizens of Israel are “landlords” over the Arab citizens of Israel.

No democracy can survive when a majority sees itself as ruling over the minority. Israel can head toward increased inequality and national polarization, with constant conflict inside and outside its borders. Or Jewish and Arab Israelis can come together to move toward a more inclusive future. Jewish American donors have already provided significant financial assistance to promote a “shared society,” and the U.S. and European governments have voiced their support. In its simplest form, a shared society means that the Jewish majority must include Arab citizens in Israel as equal members in all aspects of politics and society. It is critical that funding for this continue and expand, even as the government has proposed to limit it with punitive taxation.

Meanwhile, the center and left Jewish political parties now in the opposition must make a serious effort to integrate Arab concerns and leaders and stop debating the efficacy of Jewish-Arab unity. Of course, Arab citizens will never be Zionists. But the state must create a way for all citizens to feel Israeli. It could add new state symbols and holidays promoting a shared identity. It could introduce major anti-racism campaigns and new ways for young people to perform national service. It should work for a return to the values of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, which promotes minority rights, and toward the creation of a constitution and the overturning of the 2018 Nation-State law, passed by a previous Netanyahu government, which, among other provisions, demoted the Arabic language.

These suggestions might be aspirational, but with a mobilized and empowered Jewish nationalist bloc in charge, it’s critical to organize for a different future. And there is no way to challenge the government electorally without combined Jewish-Arab support.

The Israeli public faces a choice: either accept the government’s chauvinistic vision or move toward a more integrated and pluralistic Jewish homeland that embraces all Israeli citizens.