Israel's Arab Parties: Kingmakers by Seats, Still Outside Power



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Why in the News

The final results of Israel's Knesset (parliament) election of **27 October 2026** have produced an extraordinary situation: in the **120**-member house, the Arab parties have won a record **19** seats and the balance of government formation lies in their hands, yet neither of the two main Jewish blocs — Netanyahu's bloc (**53** seats) and Eisenkot's opposition bloc (**48** seats) — is prepared to accept their support. The magic number for a majority is **61**, and all three blocs fall short of it. This is not merely a question of power arithmetic but of the structural contradiction between Israel's dual identity — a "Jewish nation-state" and a "democracy" — which is important to understand from the examination point of view.

The Arab Parties: Seat Arithmetic and Political Position

Israel's Arab population is roughly one-fifth of all citizens. In this election, Arab voters showed unprecedented participation, and the Arab parties — among which **Ra'am** (United Arab List) and the **Hadash-Ta'al** alliance are prominent — emerged with **19** seats. In theory, either Jewish bloc could cross **61** with their support; in practice, both sides have refused: Netanyahu has continued to describe the Arab bloc as an "internal threat," while opposition leaders also spoke during the campaign of keeping their distance.

Consociational Democracy: Theory and the Israeli Limit

According to the Dutch-American political scientist **Arend Lijphart**, the key to a durable democracy in deeply divided societies is a **consociational** arrangement — power-sharing, grand coalitions, mutual veto and proportional representation. The historian **Alan Dowty** counts Israel on several criteria among consensus-based systems, but with one decisive limit: these features of partnership have historically remained confined to **intra-Jewish** politics — among secular, religious, Ashkenazi and Sephardi factions. Arab citizens hold the formal rights of citizenship, but they have been kept outside this circle of power-sharing.

The 2018 Basic Law and the Judicial Seal

The Basic Law of **2018** (the Nation-State Law) gave this situation legal form: it states that the right of national self-determination in Israel belongs **to the Jewish people alone**. Arab politicians, civil-rights organisations and non-Jewish communities (including the Druze) criticised it for lacking an explicit guarantee of civic equality. In **July 2021**, Israel's Supreme Court upheld the law in a **10-1** decision — the court accepted that the law establishes the Jewish national identity, but held that it does not nullify the individual human-rights guarantees of the other Basic Laws.

The "Enemy-Affiliated Minority" and Ethnic Democracy

The political scientist **Sami Smooha** describes Israel as an "ethnic democracy," where the position of Arab citizens is like that of an **"enemy-affiliated minority"** — by geography, history and kinship they are tied to the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, yet their political citizenship is Israeli. Amid the ongoing attacks on Gaza, most Israeli parties consider dependence on the Arab parties a direct national-security risk. On the other side, the Arab parties reject Israel's explicit Jewish-state definition and demand full rights and representation within Israel while supporting a Palestinian state on the **1967** lines. When military campaigns intensify, the pressure of their own voters on Arab MPs rises.

The 2021 Example: The Ra'am Experiment and Its Limit

This is not the first time an Arab party has come close to central power. In **2021**, the **36th** government of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid was formed with the support of Mansour Abbas's **Ra'am** party (just **4** seats). Abbas prioritised civic rights, housing, crime prevention and economic development in Arab towns over the big debates of political sovereignty. The experiment collapsed in **2022** on ideology-driven issues — including the unauthorised settlements in the occupied West Bank. The example teaches in both directions: compromise is possible, but fragile.

The Dispute: The Structural Contradiction of a Dual Identity

The root of the dispute is that Israel claims to be both a "Jewish nation-state" and a "democracy" at once. Keeping the Arab parties out of power deepens this contradiction. After the election, voices advising the opposition bloc to join the Arab parties to remove Netanyahu have grown louder, but a direct partnership with parties such as Hadash-Ta'al could detach right-wing potential allies, whose seats are equally necessary to reach **61**.

Examination Perspective

Prelims: the structure of the Knesset (**120** seats, majority **61**), proportional representation, the **2018** Nation-State Basic Law, the **2021** Supreme Court decision, the prominent Arab parties. **Mains (GS-II):** the consociational model in divided societies, minority representation, ethnic democracy versus liberal democracy, a comparison with India's constitutional arrangement.

Question 1. With reference to the current position of Israel's Knesset after the general election of 27 October 2026, consider the following statements:

Statement 1: The Knesset has a total of 120 members and a majority of 61 members is required to form a government

Statement 2: The Arab parties have achieved their highest-ever representation in this election

Statement 3: One single bloc has itself reached the majority figure

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer and Explanation
Answer: (a). In the final results, the Netanyahu bloc stood at **53**, the opposition bloc at **48** and the Arab parties at a record **19** seats — no bloc reached the **61**-seat majority, so Statement 3 is wrong.

Question 2. With reference to Israel's "Jewish nation-state" legal framework, consider the following statements:

Statement 1: Under the Basic Law of 2018, the right of national self-determination in Israel belongs to the Jewish people alone

Statement 2: In July 2021, Israel's Supreme Court declared this law unconstitutional and annulled it

Statement 3: The Ra'am (United Arab List) party joined the government formed in 2021 by extending support

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer and Explanation
Answer: (c). In July **2021**, the Supreme Court **upheld** the law by **10-1** (it did not strike it down), saying it does not extinguish the individual rights under the other Basic Laws; hence Statement 2 is wrong. Mansour Abbas's Ra'am party joined the Bennett-Lapid government of 2021.

Mains Practice Question

"In deeply divided societies, a consociational arrangement of power-sharing is regarded as a condition of stability, but when this partnership remains confined to one community, the very credibility of democracy comes under challenge." Analyse this statement with reference to the recent Israeli experience, and briefly compare it with India's constitutional arrangement. (Answer in 250 words. 15 marks)

Answer Outline

Introduction: Briefly introduce Lijphart's consociational model — power-sharing, grand coalitions, mutual veto and proportional representation.

Main Body: Discuss the intra-Jewish circle of partnership in Israel, the 2018 law and the exclusion of the Arab parties. Show the possibility of cooperation and its fragility through the Ra'am experiment of 2021. Weigh the effect on democratic credibility from the gap between formal citizenship and real power-sharing. Briefly compare with India's pluralist constitutional arrangement and its guarantee of minority rights; do not treat the two systems as identical.

Conclusion: Emphasise that stability in divided societies needs representation accompanied by effective, inclusive power-sharing.

Way Forward

Reaching **61** without the Arab parties is difficult for both blocs; Israel's options are limited — prolonged bargaining, some fragile coalition, or a fresh election. The cost of keeping the Arab parties out is not only internal: it can also affect the efforts at normalising ties with neighbouring Arab and Muslim countries under the American-backed **Abraham Accords**. The rising political participation of Arab citizens (**19** seats) shows they want their share within Israeli democracy — the question is whether the system gives them that share or not.

Sources

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2. Associated Press, 30 October 2026 — the mood of coalition talks after the final results: Link
3. Times of Israel, 29 October 2026 — full vote count: Netanyahu bloc 53, Eisenkot bloc 48, Arab parties 19: Link
4. Reuters, 26 October 2026 — Israel election results (live graphics): Link
5. Associated Press, 29 October 2026 — confirmation of results: majority lost: Link