

Netanyahu makes far-right appeal on eve of Israeli election

Barry Grey
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In a flurry of public appearances and interviews on the eve of Tuesday's parliamentary election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to unite right-wing voters behind his Likud Party with a series of ultranationalist, anti-Palestinian declarations.

Narrowly trailing the Labor Party-led Zionist Union bloc in election-eve polls, Netanyahu was evidently attempting to position himself either to win the election outright by siphoning votes away from smaller right-wing parties or place Likud in the strongest possible position to head up a new coalition government even if he fails to secure the largest number of votes.

In an interview posted Monday on the NRG news web site, Netanyahu seemed to revoke his previous formal adherence to a "two-state" policy that sanctions the creation of a demilitarized, internally divided Palestinian mini-state in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza alongside Israel. He declared that if he were reelected, he would not permit the establishment of any Palestinian state.

"Whoever moves to establish a Palestinian state or intends to withdraw from territory is simply yielding territory for radical Islamic terrorist attacks against Israel," he said. Asked if that meant a Palestinian state would not be established if he remained prime minister, he said, "Indeed."

Earlier on Monday, Netanyahu visited a Jewish settlement on a hilltop outside of East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians have claimed as the capital of a future state. The settlement, Har Homa, has been declared illegal by the Palestinians and by international authorities. Netanyahu oversaw the establishment of the settlement in 1997 during his first stint as prime minister.

"There was a huge objection" to the creation of Har Homa, he boasted, "because this neighborhood is in a location which prevents Palestinian [territorial] contiguity." He went on to declare: "We will preserve

Jerusalem's unity in all its parts. We will continue to build and fortify Jerusalem so that its division won't be possible and it will stay united forever." On this basis he appealed to disaffected Likud supporters to "come home" on Election Day.

At a rally of right-wing voters in Tel Aviv the previous evening, Netanyahu warned that he could lose the election and urged all those who opposed the so-called "center-left" opposition to coalesce around his campaign.

Netanyahu called the election last December, two years ahead of schedule, confident that he would strengthen his position with a relatively easy victory. But election-eve polls predicted that the Zionist Union would take 24 to 26 seats in the 120-member parliament, compared with 20 to 22 for Likud.

Whatever the outcome, the election will initiate a scramble among contending parties and blocs to form the new government. Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, a longtime Likud member, will decide which party to initially ask to form a government. Normally, the party or bloc that receives the highest vote is asked first, but the president has the discretion to proceed differently.

The main opposition to Likud, the Zionist Union headed by Labor's Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni of Hatnua, offers no real alternative to the right-wing, militarist policies of the incumbent government. This "center-left" bloc has gained an edge in the polls by seeking to exploit widespread social anger over rising prices, especially home prices, as well as growing inequality and official corruption.

On foreign policy, it has called for a revival of negotiations with the US-backed Palestinian Authority, pledged to impose a partial halt to Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank, and criticized Netanyahu for his confrontational stance vis-a-vis the Obama administration over Iran.

Netanyahu had calculated that his appearance two

weeks ago before a joint session of the US Congress, organized by the Republican leadership behind the back of the White House, would give his campaign a boost. Netanyahu delivered a tirade against the US-led negotiations toward an agreement on Iran's nuclear program, implicitly accusing President Obama of jeopardizing the security of both Israel and the US.

But that venture has been roundly criticized within Israel, not only by Herzog and Livni, but also by much of the media and sections of Israeli business. There is considerable concern that a shift in US policy toward Iran could signal a lessening of Washington's unconditional support for Israeli aggression against its neighbors, and that Netanyahu's confrontational policy is only making matters worse.

Economy Minister Naftali Bennett, leader of the far-right Jewish Home Party, which relies on support from religious nationalists and settlers, commented on the failure of Netanyahu's strident security warnings to evoke a greater response from the electorate.

"It's the first time that I can recall that the voters are zeroing in on the economy," he said in an interview. "Some thought there might be other issues, like Iran, but there hasn't been."

The most recent polls for Israel Army Radio found that more than half of Israelis surveyed plan to vote based on social and economic issues and that fewer than 1 in 3 put security at the top of their concerns. Nine of ten respondents said the cost of living would influence their choice. Surveys also showed that over 70 percent of people believe Israel needs a change of direction.

For their part, Netanyahu and other Likud leaders have broadly hinted at American intervention in support of their opponents. In a radio interview Sunday, Netanyahu charged that hostile Israeli journalists and "foreign powers" were behind an anti-Netanyahu campaign.

Bennett told students at Bar-Ilan University outside Tel Aviv: "All the media and all the NGOs are out to overthrow the right. I've never seen such a concentrated effort, with money from abroad."

This is likely more than just political paranoia. One group active in the campaign against the incumbent prime minister is a so-called "grassroots" organizing group calling itself V15, whose slogan is "Anyone but Bibi." (Bibi is the commonly heard nickname for Netanyahu). One of V15's top advisers is a former Obama campaign director named Jeremy Bird.

On Sunday, Livni responded to such charges by saying: "The citizens of Israel will replace Netanyahu, not

because of what is written in the newspapers, but because they don't have enough money to buy a newspaper...or buy apartments for their children."

Business leaders are taking such populist talk by Herzog and Livni in stride. Many think a change in government could produce a "peace dividend" that would prove profitable. Uriel Lynn, head of the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce, said, "There is no real difference in the economic policy of the political parties who are supposed to be coalition leaders."

The crisis of Likud and possibility of Netanyahu's ouster, after six years as prime minister, reflect a broader social and political crisis of Israeli society. Following last summer's bloody but inconclusive assault on Gaza, which killed over 2,200 Palestinians, overwhelmingly civilians and many of them women and children, there is growing war weariness within the Israeli population and a sense of having reached an impasse. Social grievances have been intensified as a result of stepped-up attacks on living standards and social services carried out to pay for the endless wars and military interventions of the Zionist state.

But opposition among workers and youth from the left can find no real expression within the existing political set-up. The narrowness of the differences between the major official parties is indicated by the fact that both Herzog and Livni were members of Netanyahu's cabinet before they were forced out of office. They supported the Israeli slaughter of civilians in Gaza this past summer and all of the previous wars carried out by Israel in the region. Livni was foreign minister during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006.

In fact, the leaders of all of the pro-Zionist parties contending in the election and bidding to play the role of kingmaker in forming the next ruling coalition were previously ministers in the Likud government under the current prime minister. This includes Avigdor Lieberman, head of the settler-based Israel Our Home Party, Moshe Kahlon of Kulanu, and Yair Lapid, the former talk show host who leads Yesh Atid.



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