Election campaign confirms further shift to the right by Israeli political establishment

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The announcement of an early election on April 9 by Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu and his Likud-led coalition has precipitated a further shift to the right across the spectrum of Israeli politics.

The timing of the election was a calculated decision by Netanyahu to face down Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit over the possibility he will be charged with corruption in one or more of several serious cases and forced to resign. He intends to whip up a ferocious campaign against Mandelblit to forestall any such indictment and maintain his position. Should Mandelblit go ahead with the indictment, Netanyahu will claim he is interfering in the election. Should he win the election, he will seek to circumscribe the legal system to ensure he gets off scot-free.

Just last week, *Ha'aretz* reported that the attorney general was set to announce his decision next month about whether to charge Netanyahu. According to newspapers reports, retired senior jurists told Mandelblit that it was his "public duty" to announce whether he will indict Netanyahu or not before the election as the public was entitled to know before voting on April 9. According to a poll conducted by Meet the Press on the Israel Television News Company, 64 percent of Israelis are in favour of Mandelblit announcing his decision before the election, with 22 percent against and 14 percent undecided.

Speaking at a press conference in Brazil during his visit to attend the fascist Jair Bolsonaro's presidential inauguration, where he also met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and fellow right-wing leaders from Honduras, Hungary and Chile, Netanyahu said, "I will not resign if I am summoned to a hearing before the election." The law did not require him to do so, he added.

With all the arrogance of the criminal financial oligarchy for whom he speaks, Netanyahu followed this up with a video on his Facebook page telling the attorney general not to announce his decision before the election. To do so, he said, would be akin to chopping off a thief's arm before finalizing the case against him.

Eliyahu Matza, a former vice president of the Supreme Court from 1992 to 2005, likened Netanyahu to a Mafia boss, telling Israel Radio, "I cannot recall any time in my entire career such statements against law enforcement by anyone other than heads of crime organizations."

He spoke against not just Netanyahu, but his entire entourage who are painting him as a martyr, the victim of—variously--the "left wing" or a "deep-state putsch." Matza added, "The prime minister, the government, members of Knesset, Netanyahu's friends--they're all under the law and they absolutely must not make comments like these that are no less than incitement against the attorney general and law enforcement agencies. It's just incitement, in the criminal sense of the word."

Not withstanding Netanyahu's personal fate, reflecting the thoroughly corrupt nature of Israeli political and economic life, the campaign is dominated by the right-wing and militaristic agenda shared by all Israeli parties, allies and opponents of Likud alike. This is inextricably linked to the Greater Israel project of Zionist expansion, upon which the wealth of Israel's elite depends and which demands both the further displacement and suppression of the Palestinians and a massive escalation in the social attacks on the Israeli working class.

The West Bank is subject to Israel's military court system, with thousands of Palestinians languishing in Israeli jails. A few weeks ago, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) took over Ramallah in the West Bank, supposedly under the control of the Palestinian Authority, blocking entry to the city, bursting into homes and arresting people.

Gaza has been subject to more than a decade of Israel's crushing and illegal blockade and numerous murderous assaults that have together all but destroyed economic life

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and reduced the besieged entity to an open-air prison.

The 370,000 Palestinians in East Jerusalem, illegally annexed after the June 1967 war, have been granted permanent residency status—although nearly 15,000 have had their residency status revoked--that permits them to vote in Israel's municipal but not national elections. At the same time, there are plans afoot in Israel's parliament to redraw the boundaries of Jerusalem to include some of the settlements blocks and exclude some of the Palestinian suburbs.

Taken together, nearly 5 million Palestinians subject to Israeli control have no right to vote in the election, compared to some 6.6 million Israelis that include 1.5 million Palestinian citizens.

Under such conditions, all of Israel's mainstream parties are jockeying for position should Netanyahu be indicted and be forced to resign, splintering and regrouping in new and ever more right-wing alliances. With their focus on "security issues," they are all appealing to former generals—often portrayed as "lefts" or "centrists" on Israel's political spectrum--to join their ranks as they compete over who has the most bellicose policy towards the Palestinians while stoking fears over Iran's expanding influence in the region.

Netanyahu is welcoming the generals with open arms as his coalition falls apart and his fascistic rivals set up their own parties in a bid for the premiership. All compete in inciting violence against the Palestinians, who have seen a threefold increase in racist attacks in 2018 over 2017.

Two of his cabinet members, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked and Education Minister Naftali Bennett, have quit their own nationalist-religious "Jewish Home" to launch their "New Right" party, with Shaked stating that this was Netanyahu's last term as prime minister. They declared, in an open challenge to Netanyahu and an appeal to disenchanted Likud voters and other right wingers, "We--and the right--must no longer be held captive by one man."

Netanyahu's bid to win over former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff Benny Gantz failed. Gantz, along with Moshe Ya'alon, a former defence minister under Netanyahu, have set up their own parties--Hosen L'Yisrael (Resilience for Israel) and Telem (National State Movement) respectively--and will run for election on a single list in a bid to outdo Netanyahu as "Mr. Security."

However, housing Minister Yoav Galant, a former IDF general, who lost his bid to become IDF Chief of Staff after allegations that he had built an access road to his home without authorization and planted an olive grove on public land surfaced, has quit the Kulani Party and joined Likud.

Another general, Gal Hirsch, has also entered politics on a Likud ticket. Hirsch is a security hawk, currently in a conflict with the police force, which he claims stymied his appointment as police commissioner three years ago.

The main opposition bloc, the Zionist Union, has split. Avi Gabbay, leader of the opposition Labor Party, dumped his alliance partner, Tzipni Livni, leader of the Hatnua Party, on live television in the hope of salvaging his party which is hemorrhaging supporters. Both face a wipe out in the election with the official burial of the so-called two state solution—their original raison d'etre and now swansong--following President Donald Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. Neither they or Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid have been able to attract a leading former military leader to their camp and thus push their own security credentials.

Tamar Zandberg, chair of the Meretz Party that came out of the Peace Now movement, is also reportedly looking for a "security expert" to join the party.

The ever more corrupt, fascistic and militaristic nature of Israel's political parties—in a country whose founding was defended with the claim that it would provide a refuge from fascism and anti-Semitism--mirrors similar trends internationally and confirms the reactionary dead-end of the entire Zionist project.

Jewish and Arab workers in Israel and throughout the region must unite in a common struggle to overthrow the Zionist state and the bourgeois Arab regimes in the region and replace them with a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

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