

Netanyahu—unable to form a government—threatens new Israeli elections

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28 May 2019

Just six weeks after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing electoral alliance won a majority in the 120-seat Knesset (parliament) in the April 9 elections, Netanyahu's Likud party has introduced legislation to dissolve the Knesset and call a second election at the end of August. Two more votes are needed before the resolution becomes law.

This unprecedented move brings to the fore the vicious factional infighting among Israel's far right parties that dominate its political system, long touted as the only democracy in the Middle East. These developments portend the implosion of Israel's political system and mirror the almost universal collapse of traditional bourgeois rule within ruling elites throughout the world.

The possibility of new elections follows Netanyahu's failure to bring Avigdor Lieberman's right-wing, secular Yisrael Beytenu (Israel is our Home) party into his coalition, which is dominated by far-right nationalists and religious zealots, leaving his prospective government with just 60 seats.

Lieberman was insistent that the new government support a law forcing ultra-Orthodox Israelis to serve in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), an anathema to Netanyahu's religious party partners. He refused to accept any of their attempts to soften it, saying, "I won't be party to a Halachic government," referring to religious Jewish law.

Lieberman added, "We will go to elections again, and the people will determine whether they want a right-wing government or a Haredi [religious] government." He claims that there are between 20 and 25 legislators who support a state run on the principles of Jewish law. The Likud Party in turn accuse him of trying to turn the escalating row over the draft conscription law into a war over religion.

Lieberman has also called for an even more aggressive military response to Hamas, the militant bourgeois

clerical group that has controlled Gaza since winning the 2006 Palestinian elections.

Netanyahu initiated the dissolution of the Knesset in a last-ditch attempt to put pressure on his coalition partners to mitigate their demands. Addressing the nation on television last night, he said, "I call on Avigdor Lieberman to reconsider. We still have 48 hours, it's possible to do many things in 48 hours." This was a reference to the Wednesday evening deadline, as set out in the election law, for forming a government.

He said that the nation voted for a right-wing government with him at its head. "In recent days, I have made tremendous efforts to fulfill the will of the people... There is no reason to paralyze the nation for another year and a half and waste billions," he declared.

But his threat to dissolve the Knesset is also aimed at preventing President Reuven Rivlin from calling on Benny Gantz, the former IDF Chief of Staff who, along with two other former chiefs of staff, leads the main opposition bloc Blue and White, to form a government if Netanyahu is unable to do so.

Despite Gantz's demand that he—as his legal right—be given a chance to form a government, it is highly unlikely he would succeed as he has ruled out any alliance with Israel's Palestinian legislators. The ultra-Orthodox and right-wing parties have refused to join a Blue and White government.

The election was held amid an escalating political, economic and social crisis. Netanyahu called it ahead of schedule in a desperate gamble to outmaneuver Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit over his expected indictment for corruption for allegedly granting regulatory concessions to businessmen in return for lavish gifts or favourable news coverage.

Netanyahu refused to resign the premiership despite facing multiple charges of corruption. Instead, fighting for his political life—and his freedom—he viewed the elections

as a means of derailing the attempt to prosecute him.

An election victory, despite the indictment, would—so he calculated—provide him with a mandate to strengthen his position. His—and Israel’s other corrupt politicians’—“get out of jail card” depends upon the passage of a so-called immunity bill and a purge of the legal apparatus that would prevent the indictment of a sitting prime minister and legislators.

The move towards fresh elections is also aimed at preventing the establishment of a government that is not led by him. It preempts any possibility of the president calling on another senior Likud member, such as Netanyahu’s rival Gideon Saar, to form a government. Saar—along with three other Likud members—has already indicated his opposition to immunity for legislators.

Not only has Netanyahu failed—this far at least—to bring Lieberman on board, he has also been unable to secure agreement with any of his other right-wing partners, despite his bill to overturn existing legislation limiting the number of ministers in his cabinet in a bid to facilitate coalition agreements. They are all using his weakened position to extract the maximum concessions from him and at the expense of their rivals.

To cite but one example, two of the ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and Yahadut HaTorah, are vying for the control of the housing and welfare ministries and real power for their deputy ministers, particularly at the Ministry of Education, to secure their own support base.

Crucially, Moshe Kahlon, the finance minister and leader of the Kulanu party which holds four seats, announced that he would not support a coalition made up of just 60 Knesset members because it would make it all but impossible for the government to function.

With Netanyahu’s real agenda a war on all opposition to the dictates of Israel’s financial and corporate elite, including legislation to outlaw strikes in essential services. Kahlon knows he will be tasked with introducing further austerity measures in a country already wracked by social tensions. It has the highest poverty rate and the most extreme social inequality of any of the so-called developed countries, except for the United States.

There have been mounting working class protests and strikes, including a recent nationwide walkout by social workers over poor pay and deteriorating working conditions. Last Tuesday, trading on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange started five hours late because of a walkout by computer operators following weeks of sanctions and work-to-rule.

Last Monday, hundreds of Israel’s Palestinian citizens

demonstrated outside the police station in Shfaram over police’s failure to fight crime in their communities or protect them. Twenty-four Palestinian Israelis have been killed since the beginning of the year.

On Saturday, some 100,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Tel Aviv to oppose Netanyahu’s attempts to pass legislation curbing the power of the High Court and allowing him to avoid prosecution. The rally, under the fraudulent banner of “Defensive Shield for Democracy,” was organized by Gantz’s Blue and White bloc and the Labour and Meretz parties. These so-called defenders of democracy refused to extend an invitation to the Arab parties.

Gantz declared rhetorically, “Netanyahu is trying to turn Israel into one-man rule. We will not allow Israel to become the private property of a royal family or a sultanate.”

Demonstrators carried placards criticizing Netanyahu and sporting his “Crime Minister” moniker in various forms. Many wore Ottoman-style fez headwear and some brought portraits of Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a reference to Netanyahu’s creation of what they called an “Erdogan-style dictatorship.”

Gantz and his band of former generals are incapable of leading any fight against the corrupt right-wing clique that dominates Israeli political life.

Jewish and Arab workers in Israel and throughout the region must reject the ever more corrupt, fascist and militaristic nature of Israel’s political parties that mirror similar trends internationally and demonstrates the bankruptcy and reactionary dead-end of the entire Zionist project. What is needed is a unified struggle, across borders and ethnicities, to overthrow the Zionist state and the various bourgeois Arab regimes in the region and replace them with a United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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