

Fresh Israeli elections after Netanyahu fails to form a government

Jean Shaoul
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Late Wednesday night, an ashen-faced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initiated legislation to dissolve the shortest Knesset (parliament) in Israel's history and hold fresh elections.

They will take place in three and a half months, the minimum period for an election campaign under law, on September 17. This is only two weeks before Netanyahu's pre-indictment hearing on a raft of corruption charges on October 2 and 3.

Calling fresh elections is an expression of the crisis of bourgeois rule gripping Israel, provoked by the twin pressures of the decades-long military suppression of the Palestinian people and deepening social inequality within Israel itself, which ranks among the highest in the developed world. Political and social tensions are so great that the traditional mechanisms of bourgeois democracy are breaking down—mirroring the political upheavals taking place throughout world.

Netanyahu has failed to form a governing coalition within the legal deadline with his former far-right nationalist and ultra-Orthodox partners, seven weeks after they and his Likud party collectively won 65 seats in the 120-seat Knesset in the April 9 elections.

Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the right-wing, secular Yisrael Beytenu (Israel is our Home) that won five seats in the Knesset, refused to join his coalition. He had resigned his post as Defence Minister last year over Netanyahu's "softness" on Gaza, leaving the government with a majority of one and precipitating an early election.

Lieberman insisted that the new government support a law forcing ultra-Orthodox Israelis to serve in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), a proposal anathema to Netanyahu's religious party partners. Lieberman refused all attempts to modify the law, 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, including stricter laws for transport and store opening hours on the Sabbath and greater control over determining Jewish identity that would affect his own, largely Russian, supporters.

This has sparked a vicious furor, with Likud accusing him of trying to turn the conscription issue into a war over religion.

Netanyahu was equally incapable of reaching an agreement with his other right-wing partners, despite his attempt to buy support by introducing legislation to expand the number of ministers in his cabinet. They all sought to use his weakened position to extract the maximum concessions at the expense of their rivals.

According to a report by Channel 12, Netanyahu even approached the Labour party and offered chairman Avi Gabbay the Finance Ministry and three other portfolios, without success.

The final straw was the refusal of Moshe Kahlon, the finance minister and leader of the Kulanu party, which holds four seats, to support a coalition made up of just 60 Knesset members because it would be almost impossible for the government to function, particularly as the forthcoming budget would require further attacks on workers' living conditions in the face of a ballooning national debt and fiscal deficit.

The crisis is engulfing Netanyahu at a time when he, his family and large sections of Israel's political elite are in the grip of several major corruption scandals. His wife Sara has just agreed to a US\$15,000 plea bargain to evade criminal prosecution over allegations she

misused US\$78,000 of state funds. Already weakened by Lieberman's defection, Netanyahu called the election ahead of schedule in a desperate attempt to outmanoeuvre Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit over his expected indictment for multiple charges of corruption involving allegedly granting regulatory concessions to businessmen in return for lavish gifts or favourable news coverage.

Netanyahu viewed the elections as a means of derailing the attempt to prosecute him, calculating that victory would give him a "personal mandate" to rule. To strengthen his electoral position, he even forged an alliance with the fascist and anti-Arab terrorist Jewish Power, comprised of followers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane. Kahane advocated the "transfer" of Palestinians to neighbouring Arab countries and a ban on intermarriage between Jews and Arabs. His Kach Party was banned as a terrorist organisation.

Netanyahu pledged before the election that he would not seek an immunity bill to prevent the indictment of a sitting prime minister and legislators, but afterwards demanded immunity legislation. Now, irrespective of whether Likud—as is expected—wins again in September, it will be too late to push through the immunity and override bills. Furthermore, the likelihood of any of his right-wing partners signing a coalition agreement with someone facing prosecution in what appears to be an open-and-shut case is all but zero. Netanyahu therefore faces the certainty of a challenge for the leadership from within Likud.

Netanyahu began the process of dissolving the Knesset on Monday to ensure that no one else became prime minister. It prevented President Reuven Rivlin from calling on Benny Gantz, the former IDF Chief of Staff who leads the main opposition bloc Blue and White, or his rival within the Likud Party, Gideon Saar, to form a government.

The elections are expected to cost US\$131 million, which—according to the Ministry of Finance—includes US\$58 million in subsidies for party campaign costs and US\$73 million for the election itself, under conditions where the parties themselves are saddled with debts from the last elections.

In whatever way this conflict is resolved, it will produce an intensification of the drive toward war, the assault on living standards and the destruction of democratic rights.

Israeli workers and youth cannot afford to remain passive spectators as the ruling class works out its internal conflicts at the expense of their economic, social and democratic rights. The fight of the working class for its interests—an end to the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians and the growing threat of war against its neighbours and Iran, along with a vast redistribution of wealth and social equality—raises the urgent necessity for a mass political movement of Israeli and Palestinian workers, independent of and opposed to both the Israeli and Palestinian political parties, against the capitalist system and for socialism.



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