

Inconclusive second elections intensify Israel's political crisis

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Israel's elections held on Tuesday have failed to deliver a conclusive result, delivering a potentially fatal blow to the political career of the likely soon-to-be-indicted prime minister and close Trump ally, Benjamin Netanyahu.

With 95 percent of votes counted in a poll that saw voter turnout of around 70 percent, up slightly from April's deadlocked vote, Netanyahu's Likud party has secured 32 seats in the 120-seat Knesset. This is one less than the 33 seats won by the Blue and White Party led by former Israel Defence Forces' (IDF) chief of staff Benny Gantz.

Gantz's so-called "centre left" bloc, which includes the Labour Party and the Meretz Party, which lined up with former prime minister and army chief Ehud Barak, has captured 44 seats. However, in staking claim to form government Gantz, like Netanyahu, will be able to point to the support of 56 Knesset members. This is because the Joint List, an alliance of Palestinian parties which is projected to win 12 seats, is ready to back the former IDF head's Blue and White against Netanyahu.

The Joint List has even offered to join in a Blue and White-led coalition government, but Gantz has rejected this.

This leaves Avigdor Lieberman, whose right-wing nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our Home) Party is set to win eight seats, as the potential kingmaker. In April Lieberman refused to join a Netanyahu-led coalition unless it introduced legislation to force ultra-Orthodox Jews to serve in the IDF. Now this longtime Netanyahu ally turned rival is demanding that Likud form a secular national unity government with Blue and White, excluding the religious parties, and threatening that if it doesn't he could support Gantz in forming a government without Likud.

Yesterday, Lieberman reiterated his support for a "broad liberal unity government" that would include Yisrael Beiteinu, Likud, and Blue and White.

Gantz for his part said that while he is waiting for the final election results, "We will act to form a broad unity government that will express the will of the people." However, he has ruled out serving under Netanyahu or sitting in cabinet with him.

Should a "national unity government" be formed, the Joint List would be the largest opposition party. Yesterday, its chairman Ayman Odeh said he was interested in becoming the

first ever Arab leader of the official opposition in the Knesset, including "attending security briefings."

In the short term, the results mean weeks of political horse trading and infighting, as Netanyahu seeks to cling to power. The elections were for him always a desperate gamble to evade the possibility of spending the rest of his life in jail for any one of several charges of corruption. He faces a pre-trial hearing within the next few weeks.

Israel's prime minister since March 2009 and for three years in the late 1990s, Netanyahu has come to personify the Zionist state's embrace of rabid militarism and Greater Israeli expansionism, and its cultivation of ultra-nationalists and the religious right. He spearheaded the recent adoption of the "Nation-State Law," which enshrines Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the Israeli state. For years he has agitated for US military action against Iran. Boasts about his close friendship and political partnership with Trump were central to his election campaign.

After failing to form a government in May following April's similarly inconclusive elections, Netanyahu preempted President Reuven Rivlin's right to call on another member of the Knesset to try and form a government, by forcing a bill through the Knesset calling for fresh elections. Had he won Tuesday's elections, his bloc would have pushed through legislation granting a sitting prime minister immunity from prosecution and if necessary further legislation curbing the powers of the Supreme Court, which is viewed as likely to overturn any such immunity bill.

In a bid to secure his election victory, Netanyahu resorted to countless maneuvers, many of them illegal. Last week, Facebook suspended Netanyahu's chatbot for 24 hours after it sent messages stating that "Arabs want to annihilate us," which the technology giant said breached its policy on hate speech.

Much of his campaigning centred on fear mongering and attempts to suppress the Arab vote, with Netanyahu "warning" his supporters that they needed to counterbalance high turnout in Arab areas. He had sought legislation, opposed by Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, that would have allowed political parties to film inside polling stations, a move seen as intended to intimidate Arab voters. In the event, this backfired, prompting a significantly higher Arab turnout than in April,

when only 49 percent of Arab Israelis voted.

Just days before the election, in a move calculated to appeal to his ultra-nationalist support base and undermine other far-right parties, Netanyahu pledged to annex the Jordan Valley and settlements in the West Bank, illegally occupied since the 1967 war.

Gantz's Blue and White have voiced no opposition to this. Indeed, Gantz has no major differences with Netanyahu on any political, economic and military issues. He focused his campaign almost entirely on Netanyahu's personal scandals and divisive tactics, presenting himself as the only clean and responsible alternative, thereby underscoring the lack of any political vehicle through which the working class could express its opposition to the financial elite on whose behalf Israel's militaristic and corrupt politicians speak.

In recent weeks, Netanyahu has sought to deflect tensions within Israel outwards, as he ordered a reckless series of military strikes against targets in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, while continuously threatening an attack against Iran. According to *Middle East Eye*, Israeli drones operating out of bases controlled by the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the main US proxy force in Syria, carried out strikes against Shia militias in Iraq, which they claim are armed by Iran.

According to reports in *Ha'aretz* and the *Jerusalem Post*, such is Netanyahu's desperation that he even sought to launch another, large-scale murderous military operation in Gaza last week as an excuse to call off the elections. The IDF opposed this, fearing that such a move—motivated by Netanyahu's desire to stay out of jail—could lead to all-out war and undermine the popular legitimacy of the state and the Israeli military. After Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit warned Netanyahu of the legal requirement to involve the security cabinet in any decision that could lead to a war, Netanyahu backed down, leaving the IDF to attack several Hamas targets in Gaza without causing any casualties.

Tuesday's election results are a devastating result for Netanyahu personally for whom the ability to form a government is his stay out of jail card. Speaking in the early hours of Wednesday morning to a very depleted Likud Party rally in Tel Aviv, a grim-faced Netanyahu refused to concede defeat. He said, "In the next few days, we will begin negotiations to form a strong, Zionist government and in order to avert a dangerous, anti-Zionist government," a reference to the Blue and White, which he denounces for being ready to work with the MPs from the Arab Joint List.

Netanyahu went on to claim that only he could exploit the "opportunities" Trump's presidency offers Israel. "Negotiations with Trump will decide Israel's future for decades, so Israel needs a strong, stable and Zionist government."

However, the US president, in clear recognition of the huge blow Netanyahu has suffered, distanced himself from the Israeli

prime minister yesterday. When asked by reporters if he had spoken with Netanyahu, whom he has repeatedly described as a close friend, Trump said he had not, adding, "Our relationship is with Israel."

President Rivlin is expected to have talks with all the party leaders before calling on Gantz or Netanyahu to try to form a national unity government. Should he tap Gantz, then Netanyahu faces a distinct threat to his leadership from within Likud, including from longtime rival Gideon Sa'ar, as well as proteges Yisrael Katz, Gilad Erdan and Yuli Edelstein.

Any "national unity government," whether headed by Blue and White or Likud, would be a ferociously anti-working class government, with both parties calling for increased spending for the military, while health, education, transport and basic infrastructure deteriorate, in a society that is among the most socially unequal in the world.

In Israel, as in the United States and every major capitalist country, there is a powerful incentive for the ruling class to direct the tensions created by insoluble economic and political crises, social inequality and growing class conflict outward through military violence and war.

Israel has become increasingly concerned over an apparent cooling of the appetite of the ruling monarchies in both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for a confrontation with Iran, the firing by US President Donald Trump of his National Security Advisor, Iran hawk John Bolton, and his floating of the possibility of direct talks with Iranian leaders.

Netanyahu, for his part, has sought to ramp up tensions with Iran. His latest disinformation campaign has revolved around claims Iran had been conducting experiments for nuclear weapons at a secret site near the city of Abadeh, but destroyed it after learning Israel had discovered its existence.

The Israeli prime minister had no doubt been gearing up to deliver yet another tirade against Iran at next week's annual UN General Assembly, but yesterday he was forced to cancel his trip to New York, citing "political circumstances."



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