

Israel's President Rivlin calls on Netanyahu to form a new government

Jean Shaoul**26 September 2019**

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin has called on soon-to-be indicted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to form a government coalition.

It comes in the wake of the collapse of negotiations between his Likud Party and the Blue and White Party of former Israel Defence Forces (IDF) chief of staff General Benny Gantz on forming a national unity government.

Netanyahu now has 28 days to assemble a coalition, with a possible 14-day extension, before Rivlin, who is determined to avoid a third election, can turn to someone else. It means that he is tasked with forming a new government just as pre-trial hearings into three separate corruption charges against him are set to begin on October 2.

With Gantz's party refusing to serve in a coalition with Netanyahu, the chances of a new government headed by Netanyahu seem slim. Even if he is successful, his efforts are unlikely to result in a functioning government much before the end of the year, nearly one year after he called for new elections in April ahead of schedule in order to secure his immunity from prosecution.

Last May, following his failure to form a new government, Netanyahu pre-empted the president's right to nominate someone else to form a government by introducing legislation to dissolve parliament and call fresh elections.

The elections for Netanyahu were always a desperate gamble to evade the possibility of spending the rest of his life in jail for corruption. Had he won the elections, he 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 was viewed as likely to overturn any such immunity bill.

While that route may be blocked for now, the law perversely prevents an indicted legislator serving as a minister but not as prime minister, who can continue to hold office right up to a guilty verdict. Thus, Netanyahu is determined to hold on to the premiership—he also holds the defence portfolio—which he views as his stay-out-of-jail card, in the run-up to any trial, while political life is dominated by his corruption charges and divisive tactics, as well as the noxious antics of his son Yair.

This time, Rivlin sought and received assurances from Likud—and Blue and White—that they will “return the mandate

to the president should they fail to form a government.”

Rivlin explained that he had even offered Netanyahu the possibility of passing a law enabling a prime minister to suspend himself while under indictment and have a deputy prime minister take over until the prime minister is cleared. This would have allowed Gantz to lead the government if Netanyahu were indicted, but Gantz rejected the proposal.

Netanyahu accepted the new mandate to form a government, saying “My inability to form a government is slightly less than that of Gantz.” He called on Gantz to join his government, citing security, diplomatic and economic reasons and raising the prospects of both war with Iran and a peace process with the Palestinians led by US President Donald Trump.

The ever-deepening political crisis surrounding Netanyahu's second failure to win a mandate to form a government that would secure his immunity from three separate and near-imminent prosecutions for corruption expresses the paralysis gripping the Israeli state. By no means unique to Israel, it parallels the broader disintegration of the traditional political set-ups that is taking place in all the main centres of world imperialism.

Irrespective of the outcome for his own political career, his right-wing, anti-working class and militaristic agenda is set to continue, posing enormous dangers for the working class in Israel/Palestine and throughout the region.

This extraordinary state of affairs has come about even though Gantz's so-called “centre-left” Blue and White won 33 seats, one more than Netanyahu's Likud, in the 120-seat Knesset. This is because Netanyahu has the support of an additional 13 Knesset members from the ultra-Orthodox parties Shas and United Torah Judaism and right-wing Yamina.

This loss of at least six seats, compared with his position before the April elections, indicates a rejection of Netanyahu's vile racist election campaign that was saturated with hate speech against both Israel's Palestinian citizens and its leftists—which led Facebook to twice suspend his chatbox—and broke several elections laws.

Nevertheless, Netanyahu has secured the backing of one more seat than those held by Gantz's supporters, which included Labor-Gesher, the Democratic Union and the Arab Joint List. In the event, three of the Arab Joint List's 13 members

withdrew their support for this general who led two murderous assaults on the Palestinians in Gaza in 2012 and 2014, leaving him with just 54 recommendations for the premiership. This is the first time since 1992, when the Haddash Party recommended Labour Party leader Yitzhak Rabin, that an Arab party has recommended any candidate for prime minister.

Rivlin, required by law to give the legislator with the largest number of recommendations the first chance to form a government, had no choice but to tap Netanyahu for the premiership.

Netanyahu now faces a formidable task in trying to assemble a coalition that can command a majority in the 120-seat Knesset. He has already signed an agreement with his three allied parties offering them ministerial posts.

Blue and White leaders, while willing to serve in a national unity government, have repeatedly refused to serve in a Netanyahu government, even though they have almost no substantive political, economic or military differences with him.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, both parties are utterly hostile to Iran. At home, they are equally hostile to the working class, with both calling for increased spending for the military at the expense of health, education, transport and other essential services.

In relation to the Palestinians, both support Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the Israeli state, the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, the annexation of the Jordan valley and the settlements, and the suppression of the Palestinians.

Indeed, Gantz's election slogans were "Only the strong win" and "Israel Before Everything"—demonstrating that no crime is too great for Israel's ruling elite. He had no qualms about revealing his own criminality: bragging about assassinating Ahmed Jabari, the former Hamas military commander whose death in an Israeli airstrike on Gaza triggered the 2012 war, and boasting about killing 1,364 "terrorists" in the 2014 war in return for "three-and-a-half years of quiet," and "Returning parts of Gaza to the Stone Age." The latter was a reference to the bombing campaign that destroyed parts of Rafah and is now the subject of an ICC investigation.

In the next few months, a court in the Netherlands will decide whether it has the jurisdiction to hear a civil claim brought by a Dutch citizen of Palestinian origin against Gantz for the death of his family in Gaza in the 2014 war.

Gantz's conditions for joining any national unity government include a "liberal" administration without Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox partners, with whom Netanyahu has already signed a new alliance. His party's demands include passing the controversial conscription bill that requires the ultra-Orthodox Jews to serve in the IDF, public transport on Saturdays, civil marriage and implementing an agreement on "egalitarian" prayer (for men and women) at the Western Wall, all of which are opposed by Netanyahu's religious allies.

Netanyahu is therefore likely to focus on enticing Blue and White's ally, Labor-Gesher, with its six seats, to join his coalition.

But the kingmaker is undoubtedly Avigdor Lieberman's nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu, which has eight seats and has refused to bloc with either party. This former Netanyahu ally turned rival, who has called for the transfer of Israel's Arab citizens to some putative Palestinian state, is demanding a secular national unity government, without the religious parties or the Arab Joint List, that would include Likud, Blue and White and Israel Beiteinu.

Should Netanyahu fail in his endeavours to form a new government, he will face the threat to his leadership from within Likud, including long-time rival Gideon Sa'ar, as well as protégés Yisrael Katz, Gilad Erdan and Yuli Edelstein.

Under such conditions, it is not inconceivable that Netanyahu, who before the election was prepared to launch a war against Gaza until warned off by Israel's Attorney General, may create a "national emergency"—whether in relation to the Palestinians or Iran and its allies in the region—to shore up his support and jeopardize any chance of someone else—be it Lieberman, Gantz or a rival within his own party—forming a national unity government.

These sordid and unprincipled manoeuvres reveal the absence of any political vehicle within the Zionist political establishment for the Israeli working class, Jewish and Arab alike, to express its social concerns and interests. They reflect the deep crisis of bourgeois rule gripping the state, provoked by the twin pressures of the decades-long military suppression of the Palestinian people and the increasing social inequality within Israel itself, which ranks among the highest in the developed world.



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