

Ultra-right Lieberman holds balance of power in Israeli coalition talks

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Two months after the second inconclusive election in one year, with Israel's fractured political establishment no nearer to forming a new coalition government, Avigdor Lieberman, the fascistic leader of Yisrael Beiteinu, has issued an ultimatum. He will support Benjamin Netanyahu or Benny Gantz as prime minister if the other thwarts a unity government that would include both parties.

With his party holding eight seats in the 120-seat Knesset, Lieberman is the kingmaker. He has thus far refused to bloc with either Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party or the Blue and White Party of former Israel Defence Forces Chief of Staff Benny Gantz.

Speaking on Channel 12 television, Lieberman said, "Gantz should accept the president's plan for rotation of the premiership with Netanyahu, and Netanyahu should give up the right-wing bloc. Whoever fails to make the decisions he ought to make will pay the price."

He explained that whoever blocked the formation of a secular national unity government would risk Lieberman giving his support to the other side, in order to avoid a third general election in Israel. That is, he would support a government headed by Netanyahu that included the ultra-orthodox parties—something he had previously opposed—or a government headed by Gantz, supported but not joined by the Palestinian Arab parties, which he had also opposed.

This could result in one of three outcomes: a unity government with Netanyahu as its head until he is formally indicted, at which point Gantz would take over; a right-wing-religious coalition led by Netanyahu; or a "centre-left" government headed by Gantz. While Yisrael Beiteinu would be embedded in each, the resulting coalition would be very unstable.

If Lieberman does not get his way, it would mean another election, most likely in May, leaving Netanyahu at the helm until then.

This former ally turned rival of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is one of Israel's most notorious racists and warmongers, hostile to both the Palestinians and Iran. He has demanded that Israel's Arab citizens take a loyalty oath to

the State of Israel, insisted on the transfer of Israel's Arab citizens living in Wadi Ara near the West Bank as the precondition for any future Palestinian statelet and called for the raising of the electoral threshold in order to diminish the strength of the Arab parties in parliament.

During the 2008-09 military assault on Gaza, Lieberman appeared to call for the nuclear bombing of Gaza, saying, Israel "must continue to fight Hamas just like the United States did with the Japanese in World War II. Then, too, the occupation of the country was unnecessary." He deems that Arab legislators who meet with Hamas are "terror collaborators" and has called for their execution.

He set up the Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our Home) in 1999 as his own political vehicle among Soviet immigrants, advocating a hard line towards the Palestinians and serving in most governments since 2001. It was his resignation on November 14 last year from Netanyahu's coalition over the government's ceasefire with Hamas, the right-wing Islamist group that controls Gaza, that precipitated April's inconclusive elections and the ensuing political stalemate.

That a man of his ilk should be able to wield such power is extraordinary. It 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 the ultra-Orthodox parties Shas and United Torah Judaism and right-wing Yamina. Last week, he organised a merger with Yamina, offering Naftali Bennett, one of its leaders, the Ministry of Defence. With 55 seats, Netanyahu's bloc has one more than Gantz's, which includes Labor-Gesher, the Democratic Union and 10 members of the Arab Joint List.

President Reuven Rivlin first tried and failed to negotiate a government of national unity between Netanyahu's Likud Party and Gantz's Blue and White Party. He then invited Netanyahu, whose Likud had more potential allies than Gantz's Blue and White, to try to form a government. Two weeks ago, when Netanyahu proved unable to secure a 61-seat majority in the Knesset, Rivlin turned to Gantz, who has until the end of November to try to cobble together a

coalition.

Blue and White leaders, while willing to serve in a national unity government, have repeatedly refused to serve under a government led by Netanyahu, who faces indictment on corruption charges that could put him behind bars for the rest of his life. 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.

With the law perversely preventing an indicted legislator serving as a minister but not as prime minister, who can continue to hold office right up to a guilty verdict, Netanyahu is determined to hold on to the premiership, which he views as his stay out of jail card, in the run-up to any trial.

With the two parties having almost no political, economic or military differences of substance, the elections mainly focused on Netanyahu and his sordid maneuverings to avoid prosecution.

Two main parties offer no alternative to Israel's working class, who like their class brothers and sisters elsewhere face soaring living costs and massive social inequality. Both parties speak for Israel's financial elite. Both are utterly hostile to the Palestinians and are aligned with US imperialism's war drive against Iran. 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 Palestinian opposition. 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.

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 prosecutions for corruption expresses the paralysis gripping the Israeli state. It reflects the deep crisis of bourgeois rule gripping the state, provoked by the triple pressures of repeated wars or threats of war in the region, 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.

More than one quarter of Israeli households live in poverty, and a study by the Adva Center reported earlier this year that families living just above the official poverty threshold were not much better off.

Israel's political paralysis is not unique but mirrors the broader disintegration of the traditional political structures that is taking place in all the main centres of world imperialism.

Irrespective of how the political stalemate is resolved, Netanyahu's 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.

Indeed, it is not difficult to foresee that Netanyahu, who was prepared to launch a war against Gaza until warned off by Israel's Attorney General before the election, may orchestrate a "national emergency"—whether in relation to the Palestinians or Iran and its allies in the region—to shore up his support and prevent anyone else forming a national unity government.

The critical question for the working class is to elaborate its own, independent attitude in opposition to these two reactionary factions of the ruling class. The working class must not leave the resolution of the crisis to these rival camps within the ruling capitalist class.

The working class must orient to the growth of the class struggle in Israel and throughout the region. In the last few months, Israel has witnessed a national strike by nurses, votes by numerous groups of workers for industrial action that have been blocked by the unions or the courts—most recently in September in the case of the teachers—and protests against police brutality and in defence of migrant workers and their Israeli-born children against deportation. These strikes and protests testify to the primacy of class over ethnicity and religion. All this takes place alongside growing class struggles in the region.

The key question is to give this movement of the working class an understanding of its own aims and how they can be achieved. It means building a political leadership to break out of the straitjacket imposed by the treacherous trade union leaders and political parties and direct these struggles to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism.



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