

Israel's political impasse ahead of third election in a year

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Israelis will go to the polls on March 2, 2020 in an unprecedented third election in just under a year, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to form a national unity government with the Blue and White Party of former Israel Defence Forces (IDF) chief of staff Benny Gantz.

This follows two inconclusive elections in April and September, when neither leader was able to secure a governing coalition that could command a majority in the 120-seat Knesset, and Netanyahu's long-expected indictment last month on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in several corruption cases.

Netanyahu has rejected the charges, insisting that the case against him was built on lies and political animosity, and called for Israel's citizens to "investigate the investigators," telling them they were "witnessing an attempted coup."

The election campaign has now become the arena for an all-out war between the country's top prosecutor and the prime minister as each accuses the other of subverting the rule of law. Netanyahu's aim is to secure a 61-seat Knesset majority to ensure his immunity from prosecution by radically transforming the state's legal system.

Nothing but Netanyahu, his fitness for office and his manoeuvres are being discussed: not the rising cost of living, social inequality that is among the highest in the OECD countries, a poverty rate of 21 percent, relations with the Palestinians, military aggression against Iran and its allies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon on Israel's northern border, or the impact of a rising military budget at the expense of already woeful public services and public infrastructure.

The latest in a series of inconclusive elections is not merely a reflection of attempts by Netanyahu and his supporters to avoid his prosecution. More fundamentally, Netanyahu's conduct of the election campaign constitutes a warning that the Israeli state is rapidly dispensing with any pretense of commitment to democracy or equal rights. It is preparing to carry out massive crimes against its citizens, Jews and Palestinians alike, even as it steps up preparations for a military confrontation with Iran.

Netanyahu is serving as a caretaker prime minister until

the elections set for March 2. He has had to surrender his clutch of ministerial portfolios, as the law does not allow ministers who have been indicted to continue to hold office, although it does—thanks to a legal oversight in the drafting—permit a serving prime minister to do so.

Netanyahu and his right-wing and ultra-orthodox partners need to secure 61 seats in the Knesset, without his former ally Avigdor Liberman, to form a right-wing government that would enable to him to secure legislation that would give a prime minister immunity from prosecution.

But even more critical is whether he can legally form a government after the elections. While the law allows an indicted prime minister to continue serving in the middle of a term, it is far from clear that the law permits someone who has been charged with criminal offences to form a new government.

The attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, is under pressure to make just such a ruling, which—should it go against Netanyahu—would inevitably be challenged in court. Should the High Court of Justice rule against him, Netanyahu has vowed to unleash his right-wing allies in an all-out attack on the judiciary, potentially fueling violent clashes between his supporters and opponents.

His attack dog is Amir Ohana, the newly appointed Minister of Justice, who is even more confrontational than Ayelet Shaked of the New Right Party when she held the post. He has railed against the "legal junta" running the country and taken every opportunity to lash out against the state prosecutor over Netanyahu's indictments, calling the judiciary "a conspiracy against the people."

Ohana appointed Orly Ben-Ari Ginsberg, Tel Aviv's deputy district prosecutor, as acting state prosecutor to replace Shai Nitzan, after his term expired, in defiance of the attorney general's objection to a third-tier candidate who had failed three times in her bid for the district prosecutor's job. This deliberate incitement prompted Mandelblit to refuse to defend the state against any challenges by the Supreme Court against the appointment. With the Supreme Court ordering the suspension of Ben-Ari's appointment,

the stage is now set for a major battle between Netanyahu's supporters and Israel's judicial system.

Ohana has the support of Likud legislator Yariv Levin, who holds the tourism and immigration portfolios and shepherded the "nation-state" law through the Knesset last year that restricts nationality rights to Israel's Jewish, as opposed to Palestinian, citizens. The nation-state law thereby enshrines de facto Jewish supremacy in Israel and apartheid-style discrimination and segregation practiced against the country's Palestinian citizens in a quasi-constitutional Basic Law.

For years, Levin worked to circumscribe the power of the courts and amend the judicial appointments process, meeting with opposition even from Netanyahu himself. But that is all in the past as Netanyahu, fighting for his political life and freedom, has adopted Levin's programme.

Mandelblit, once a close political associate of Netanyahu, warned against "violent and belligerent discourse against law enforcement officials," which he called "playing with fire." He said, "Law enforcement is not a choice," adding "This is not a matter of left or right. This is not a matter of politics."

Netanyahu is pushing for his right-wing partners—Jewish Home, National Union and the openly fascist Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power)—to form a single list, making it more likely for them to pass the electoral threshold and bolster his position in the Knesset. Otzma Yehudit's most senior members are disciples of nationalist Rabbi Meir Kahane, whose Kach party was banned in the 1980s. Netanyahu's foul manoeuvre would at the same time encourage those who balk at supporting Otzma Yehudit to vote for Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked's New Right.

In effect, Netanyahu is raising Otzma Yehudit chief, Itamar Ben Gvir, to the position of kingmaker. Ben Gvir seized the opportunity to demand immediate negotiations to form such a joint list in return for placing him third on the list, after Jewish Home's Rafi Peretz and National Union's Bezalel Smotrich, and a second seat for his party within the top six.

Netanyahu has also moved to strengthen his hold over the Likud Party. He tried to cancel the primaries for its Knesset roster ahead of the election, in a move seen as a bid to maintain the support of Likud loyalists fearful of losing their seats in a primary. But Likud's internal court ruled this as unconstitutional, which could force the party to hold snap primaries in the coming weeks.

On December 26, Netanyahu faces a leadership challenge from former interior minister Gideon Sa'ar, whose supporters claim that thousands of voters had been purged from the party's rolls ahead of the primary. Sa'ar has demanded that cameras be placed at voting stations to

prevent voter fraud. Although he is not expected to win the leadership contest, he is the first serious challenger to Netanyahu to emerge in years.

That such a thoroughly corrupt and cynical politician as Netanyahu can dominate the agenda is only due to the rottenness of Gantz's Blue and White, made up of a coterie of ex-generals and a former TV journalist, and its "leftist" allies, the Labor-Gesher Party and the Democratic Union, a merger between supporters of former chief of staff and prime minister Ehud Barak and the Peace Now-camp Meretz Party.

Gantz is a right-wing military chauvinist, whose policies are virtually indistinguishable from Netanyahu's. He has had almost nothing to say about the economic situation facing Israeli workers, focusing instead on the supposed threat from Iran and rejecting any alignment with the Palestinian Israelis organized politically in the Joint List.

Netanyahu's turn to confrontation with the state's judiciary takes place as Israel carries out increasingly reckless military actions in Syria amid signs of an escalation of the US campaign against Iran, which Washington has targeted as a principal obstacle to its drive to assert unhindered hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East. Whereas in the past when the IDF carried out attacks in Syria—both to hit targets associated with Iran and support Al Qaeda-linked militias—Israel usually refused to confirm or deny responsibility. Naftali Bennett, the new and extreme right-wing Defense Minister from the New Right Party, said that the strikes were a message to Iran that "everywhere you send your tentacles, we will lop them off."



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