

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu seeks immunity from prosecution

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced that he will officially request that the Knesset (parliament) grant him immunity from prosecution in the three corruption cases he faces, a move aimed at postponing criminal proceedings against him for months if not years.

Speaking at a press conference January 1 in Jerusalem, he said, “There are people who, unlike me, did commit grave crimes, and they have life-long immunity. They are just on the right side of the media and the left wing.”

“The immunity law is meant to protect public representatives from being framed. The law is meant to ensure that public representatives can serve the people according to the will of the people, and not the will of some clerks,” he continued.

Netanyahu used language straight out of Orwell’s *1984* to justify his manoeuvre, despite having previously and very publicly denied that he would request immunity. At the press conference, he declared that “immunity from prosecution is not evading trial,” and is “a cornerstone of democracy.”

His move threatens to paralyse the Knesset’s work for months to come, block discussion during the upcoming election campaign of any issues—domestic or foreign—other than Netanyahu’s suitability for office, and shift politics even further to the right and into the arms of open fascists.

The crisis over Netanyahu can also serve as a dangerous accelerant in the growing war crisis provoked by the Trump administration’s criminal provocations against Iran. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman summoned military and security chiefs to Tel Aviv yesterday to discuss Israel’s response to Washington’s targeted assassination of Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani.

Israel Army Radio stressed concerns about a potential Iranian counterattack via Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza. Netanyahu cut short his trip to

Greece, where he signed an agreement with Greece and Cyprus to develop a 1,900 kilometre undersea pipeline to carry gas from offshore deposits in the southeastern Mediterranean to continental Europe—a move that pits Israel against both Russia and Turkey.

That Netanyahu continues to govern in such a situation demonstrates that the Israeli state, like that of its main sponsor in Washington, is rapidly dispensing with any pretence of commitment to democracy, accountability or equal rights. It is preparing to carry out massive crimes against its citizens, Jews and Palestinians alike, even as it steps up preparations, without any mandate, for a military confrontation with Iran.

Israel goes to the polls on March 2 in an unprecedented third election in less than a year, after neither Netanyahu, head of the Likud Party, nor former chief of staff General Benny Gantz, leader of the opposition Blue and White Party, succeeded in forming a governing coalition that could command a majority in the 120-seat Knesset.

Netanyahu was indicted in November on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three cases that have been investigated for years. They relate to allegations that he offered or granted state favours worth hundreds of millions of dollars to Israel’s media barons in return for favourable coverage and handsome gifts.

Despite evidence, captured on video, presenting open and shut cases of bribery and corruption, Netanyahu denies any wrongdoing. Instead, he has sought to portray himself as the victim of a left-wing, pro-Arab plot by the media and judiciary to frame him and organise a coup.

Netanyahu’s announcement came after two favourable developments. The first was the High Court’s dismissal on Tuesday of a petition seeking to block him from forming another government should he win the election. The justices argued that it was irrelevant to discuss such a possibility ahead of the actual vote.

The second was his resounding victory in a leadership

challenge from former interior minister Gideon Sa'ar in the Likud Party primaries.

Sa'ar offered no alternative perspective to Netanyahu. He has a long record of supporting the expansion of Israeli settlements and opposing any accommodation with the Palestinians. He repeatedly called on Netanyahu to implement his pledge to demolish the Bedouin hamlet of Khan al-Ahmar in the occupied West Bank, which is located near several settlement blocks. He accused Netanyahu of running scared in the face of a possible investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague, whose chief prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, had said that the razing of the hamlet could be a war crime.

According to Israeli law, Netanyahu's immunity request requires the approval of the Knesset's House Committee and then the full Knesset. But because no House Committee was appointed after the first election in April, and none will be put in place until after the March election, this will delay the decision for months.

Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the Israel Beiteinu party, which holds the votes that assure him the position of kingmaker, said he was opposed to Netanyahu getting immunity and would do everything he could to stop him. His votes, plus those of the opposition bloc, mean that Netanyahu cannot command a majority to secure immunity in the Knesset with its current political lineup.

As a result, Netanyahu's election campaign will focus on attacking Israel's judiciary while positioning himself as the victim of "deep state" forces that cannot defeat him at the polls. Beating the war drum against Iran will be seen by Netanyahu as the best means of obtaining the necessary 61 delegate majority.

A key part of his election strategy lies in brokering a merger of his far-right coalition partners—Jewish Home, National Union and the openly fascist Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power)—to form a single list capable of passing the electoral threshold and bolster his position in the Knesset.

Otzma Yehudit ran alone in last September's election and did not meet the vote threshold to enter the Knesset. Its most senior members are disciples of the late fascist and racist Rabbi Meir Kahane, whose Kach party submitted a bill to cancel the citizenship of non-Jews in 1985. Three years later, the party was disqualified from running in the elections and in 1994 the government declared it a terror organization.

Prior to last September's election, Michael Ben Ari, Otzma Yehudit's chairman, was disqualified because of his incitement, along with two others, of anti-Arab racism.

Otzma Yehudit calls for the establishment of Jewish settlements in all parts of the West Bank, not just in Area C; the imposition of Israeli sovereignty over all West Bank territories; the implementation of Jewish law and "removing Israel's enemies from our land." Netanyahu's foul manoeuvre elevates Otzma Yehudit chief Ben Gvir to the position of kingmaker. If elected, it gives him a seat in the cabinet.

This shift to the right is facilitated by the rottenness of Gantz's Blue and White Party, which is made up 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.

None of these forces have anything to offer the working class, which saw the poverty rate for children rise from 27.1 percent to 29.1 percent in 2018, making Israel one of two countries with the worst child poverty rate in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, according to Israel's National Insurance Institute's annual report published earlier this week.

The percentage of the population living in poverty (excluding eastern Jerusalem, where poverty among Palestinian Israelis is even more acute) rose from about 19.4 in 2017 to about 20.4 percent in 2018.

As well as showing an increase in the Gini inequality index, which is 10 percent higher than that of other developed countries, the report criticized the "weakness of the government's policy in addressing poverty," saying that its tools for addressing the problem are "too few and too hesitant."



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