

Third election in a year deepens Israel's political crisis

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In a criminal move caught on video, an Israeli military bulldozer scooped up and moved the body of a young Palestinian demonstrating near Gaza's fence with Israel on Sunday. To compound the crime, troops fired on Palestinians trying to retrieve his body, wounding two.

Twenty-seven-year-old Mohammed Ali al-Naim, a member of Islamic Jihad, had been shot by Israeli forces who lyingly claimed he was laying a bomb near the fence. This war crime, one of countless such criminal acts, and the image of al-Naim's corpse hanging from the teeth of the bulldozer, caused outrage among the Palestinian citizens of Gaza who have suffered a 13-year-long blockade at the hands of Israel and latterly Egypt and the Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas.

Israel followed this up with dozens of air strikes throughout the besieged entity as tensions escalated and Palestinian groups retaliated by firing rockets into Israel. The army said it was closing roads, schools and a train line near the Gaza Strip.

Fighter jets simultaneously launched air strikes on Islamic Jihad positions—Israel views the group as an Iranian proxy—near the Syrian capital Damascus, killing two of its fighters and four pro-Iranian fighters.

This stepped-up aggression, launched by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a desperate bid to boost his position as “Mr. Security,” takes place in the run up to the election on March 2, the third in less than a year. The result is the deepening paralysis of a government that has almost ceased to function amid the stench of a corrupt and decaying political system that is careening towards fascism and militarism.

Like their counterparts all over the world Israeli voters have no substantive choice, despite an array of political parties, as Israel's democracy has withered

under the twin pressures of the decades-long military suppression of the Palestinian people and rising social inequality, among the highest in the world.

This latest ballot follows two inconclusive elections in April and September, when neither caretaker Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz, a former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff, were able to secure a coalition that could command a majority in the 120-seat Knesset. The first bloc is led by Netanyahu's right-wing Likud Party and his coalition of religious and fascistic parties. The second bloc, the supposedly “centrist” Blue and White party named after the colours of Israel's flag, is led by Gantz.

Gantz's potential coalition partners include the Labor-Gesher-Meretz bloc, formed out of a bunch of former generals, and the remnants of the once dominant Labor Party and peace movement. Last month, they merged to prevent electoral oblivion in the face of the official burial of the so-called two-state solution—their original *raison d'être*.

Meretz's liquidation into Gesher is particularly significant. Not only has it jettisoned its pro-peace stance but also its appeal to Israel's Arab voters. For years, it was the only Zionist party that claimed to represent both Jews and Arabs, with Arab candidates holding two of the top five slots on the slate in last April's election. Now its Arab candidate holds the 11th slot on its slate. Gesher's leader, Orly Levi-Abekasis, is a former member of Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, who sponsored the original bill paving the way for the nation-state law sanctioning Jewish supremacy over Israel's Arab citizens.

The latest election, like its two predecessors, focuses on one issue only: Netanyahu's fitness for office and his sordid political manoeuvres, with the opposition

forces campaigning for “anyone but Bibi.”

Just two weeks after the election, Netanyahu will attend court for the start of his trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in corruption cases that have dragged on for years. If convicted, he could spend the rest of his life in jail. He has denied the charges, urging his supporters to defend him against a judiciary that has succumbed to a “left-wing plot” and “an attempted coup” against him.

Netanyahu has been able to stay in office firstly because the law does not require an indicted prime minister, as opposed to ministers, to resign—thanks to a legal oversight in its drafting—and secondly because the opposition bloc shares his foreign and domestic policy agendas. Both are committed to Israel’s expansion into the occupied West Bank.

Netanyahu has carried out one political manoeuvre after another aimed at avoiding prosecution and maintaining his bloc’s domination of the Knesset via concessions to his far-right coalition partners. He is prepared to hold as many elections as necessary to achieve this. If successful in forming a government, he intends to radically transform the state’s legal system to ensure his trial cannot go ahead.

He has sought to position himself as a world statesman indispensable to Israel’s national interests, leveraging US President Donald Trump’s support to appeal to the fascistic layers of the settlers and religious nationalists within his support base. He has brandished Trump’s farcical “deal of the century,” which recognizes the “facts on the ground” established by relentless Israeli aggression and land grabs in the occupied territories, as a green light for the formal annexation of these territories and the consolidation of an apartheid regime.

Netanyahu has made much of his visit to President Vladimir Putin in Moscow that secured the release of Naama Issachar, a young Israeli woman jailed on drug charges, and his meeting in Uganda with General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the military chief of Sudan’s Sovereignty Council, to secure the normalization of relations with a state backed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

He has escalated his incitement against Israel’s Arab citizens, smearing a Blue and White-led coalition dependent on the support of the Arab List, a coalition of four Israeli Arab parties, as illegitimate. Netanyahu

said that such a government would be “celebrated in Tehran, Ramallah and Gaza, the way they celebrate after every attack. This would be a historic national attack on the state of Israel.” He named and attacked members of the Knesset, Ayman Odeh and Ahmad Tibi, who have since received death threats. Gantz has gone along with this racist slur, ruling out any coalition with the Joint List.

Netanyahu has stepped up efforts to exert Israel’s control over Palestinian land through the establishment of national parks, building in east Jerusalem, increased settlement expansion and continued Palestinian home demolitions.

The Defense Ministry has approved the creation of seven new Israeli nature reserves in Area C of the occupied West Bank, which is under Israel’s military rule, and the expansion of 12 existing nature reserves in the West Bank. The announcement followed Defense Minister Naftali Bennett’s declaration at a forum of right-wing activists and academics in Jerusalem that Area C “belongs to Israel.”

The authorities have given approval for nearly 7,000 new homes for Jewish Israelis in predominantly Palestinian eastern Jerusalem, in the Givat Hamatos neighbourhood, Har Homa and Gilo, as part of a plan to Judaicise east Jerusalem by “connecting Jerusalem” and cutting the territorial contiguity between east Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the West Bank.

Last month, the government approved the construction of 1,936 homes in the West Bank, with a further 786 receiving the final endorsement, including 258 to be built in Haresha, an “illegal outpost” west of Ramallah. The Israeli authorities have demolished nearly 700 Palestinian buildings in the West Bank in 2019, with 300 demolitions in Jerusalem alone.

The settlers have been given carte blanche to attack the Palestinians. On Friday, 4,000 thugs arrived in chartered buses and raided the villages of Laqba and Al Burj in the north of the Jordan Valley, under the full protection of the Israeli army.



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