

Victory for Netanyahu leaves him short of a majority

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party and its right-wing and religious allies emerged victorious in Monday's general election, but were left two seats short of an overall majority in the 120 seat Knesset.

The result, which strengthens Netanyahu's position, presages a turn to dictatorial rule amid a bitter constitutional and economic crisis and the escalating threat of war against Iran and its allies.

Netanyahu is focusing all his efforts on persuading Benny Gantz, the leader of the opposition Blue and White party, or at least some members of his party, to dump their pledge not to serve under an indicted prime minister and join a national unity government. He is banking on their reluctance to face a fourth election.

With 90 percent of votes counted in a poll that saw voter turnout of around 71 percent, similar to September's deadlocked vote, Netanyahu's Likud party secured 36 seats, restoring the party's position to that before the first inconclusive election in April. This, together with the seats of his right-wing and religious allies, gives him 59 seats.

The opposition bloc, Gantz's Blue and White party and his political allies, which includes the Gesher, made up of Likud dissidents and other right-wingers, and the remnants of the Labor and Meretz Parties, captured just 39 seats. The ongoing collapse in the Labor/Gesher/Meretz vote from 11 to 7 in September's election reflects the political demise of the "two state solution" that had become their sole *raison d'être*.

Gantz's other potential supporters include the Joint List, an alliance of four Palestinian Israeli parties, which increased its seats to 15. However, Gantz has ruled out any coalition with the Joint List. His third failure to unseat Netanyahu puts his political survival and that of his party on the line.

Netanyahu is due in court on March 17 to defend himself against criminal charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate corruption cases that have dragged on for years. If convicted, he could spend the rest of his life in jail.

He is determined to hold onto office in order to change

Israel's judicial system and prevent his prosecution. He has called for Israel's citizens to "investigate the investigators," telling them they were "witnessing an attempted coup." There is now 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 wants to avoid any dependency on Avigdor Lieberman, whose Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our Home) Party won seven seats. It was Lieberman whose resignation from the Likud-led coalition in November 2018 precipitated the three elections. He has previously refused to join a Netanyahu-led coalition unless it reduced the role of the religious authorities in Israeli society and introduced legislation to force ultra-Orthodox Jews to serve in the Israel Defence Forces, and called for a "broad liberal unity government" that would include Yisrael Beiteinu, Likud and Blue and White. Now, this long-time Netanyahu ally has said he is determined to prevent a fourth election.

Netanyahu has been able to continue in office firstly because the law does not require an indicted prime minister, as opposed to other 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 blocs are equally committed to Israel's expansion into the occupied West Bank.

Throughout the election campaign, he made repeated appeals to his right-wing base. He lauded US President Donald Trump's "deal of the century," which was timed to bolster a key Washington and Persian Gulf ally and Trump soulmate against Iran. The deal, by recognizing the "facts on the ground" established by relentless Israeli aggression and land grabs in the occupied Palestinian territories, gave Netanyahu the go-ahead to formally annex these territories and consolidate an apartheid regime.

He immediately announced plans to establish new national parks in the West Bank and build 7,000 new homes in east Jerusalem and 3,000 in the settlements, while demolishing 700 Palestinian homes, and promised to begin the formal annexation of parts of the West Bank.

Netanyahu fought a vicious campaign, escalating his incitement against Israel's Palestinian citizens, smearing a Blue and White-led coalition dependent on the support of the Joint List as illegitimate. He named and attacked members of the Knesset, Ayman Odeh and Ahmad Tibi, who have since received death threats. He launched one slanderous attack after another on Gantz, attacking his patriotism, mental health and financial and personal integrity.

Gantz offered voters nothing but a change in personnel, and they are largely discredited former Netanyahu allies. With policies in relation to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Gaza and Iran that did not differ from Netanyahu's, he had little to say about combating the increasing social inequality, poverty, social exclusion and racism that characterise Israeli society.

The remaining 400,000 votes from contested ballots, prisoners, soldiers, quarantined patients and diplomats still to be counted are not expected to change the overall results significantly. President Reuven Rivlin has announced that he will wait for the official results from the Central Elections Committee next Tuesday before starting consultations over who to ask to form a government.

Rivlin, a Likud member turned opponent of Netanyahu, is acutely aware that should he nominate Netanyahu to form a government and his horse trading succeeds in assembling a 61-seat majority, he will face a legal challenge to his decision, given that Netanyahu is an indicted criminal.

Should Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, a former political ally and appointee of Netanyahu, the Supreme Court or Rivlin rule against him forming a new government, this will spark an unprecedented clash between the Knesset, the judicial system and Netanyahu's right-wing and fascist supporters, leading to a breakdown of the entire political system and civil war.

Netanyahu has abandoned the idea of an "immunity bill" as his get-out-of-jail card. Instead, he intends to introduce a law banning the High Court, which has overturned a number of key government decisions, from ruling against laws or administrative decisions on grounds of unreasonableness. This would allow his coalition to ignore any High Court ruling that it doesn't like, making the judicial system subservient to the Prime Minister's Office.

Having neutered the High Court, Netanyahu intends to appoint a new attorney general, more sympathetic to himself and his fascist cronies, whose task will be to delay the legal proceedings against Netanyahu, using his existing powers under Section 231(a) of the Criminal Procedure Law, cancelling the trial. Any attempts by the public or other authorities to appeal the delay would come up against the government's power to overrule any High Court decision.

In addition to the pending constitutional crisis, Israel faces

a downturn in the economy, amid declining prospects for the world economy which threatens to bring the vital tourism sector to a standstill. El Al, the national airline, has started laying off employees, following revenue losses due to the Covid-19 outbreak, just days after reports that it planned to sack 1,000 of its 6,300 workforce.

The government, lacking the majority to pass a budget for 2020, has been extending the 2019 austerity budget on a month-by-month basis, which must be kept by law to a maximum of 2.5 percent of GDP and 2.25 percent in 2021. While Netanyahu had planned to increase the maximum permitted deficit, the slowing economy will require an even higher deficit. Treasury officials had previously forecast cuts of \$5.7 billion for the 2020 budget to reduce the deficit, but this did not account for the promised increase in allowances for the disabled due in April, subsidies for after-school programmes, or for the IDF's budget.

The Finance Ministry plans to raise taxes and cut expenditure, including raising tax rates, reducing tax benefits, raising the pension age for women, congestion fees at peak traffic hours, a law enabling the establishment of a metropolitan transit network for greater Tel Aviv, and taxes on sugary drinks.

The IDF has already secured approval from Netanyahu and the defence and finance ministers for a massive \$440 million budget supplement for the next two years that has not yet been budgeted for.



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