

Israel faces fourth election within two years

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Israel's Blue and White Party, the coalition partner of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud, has voted with the opposition parties for an early election. Netanyahu's "emergency unity" coalition, formed in May after Israel's third inconclusive election within a year, has been almost paralysed for months, with its fractious cabinet rarely meeting.

An imminent fourth election within the space of two years testifies to the deep political crisis confronting Israel, amid the broader economic and healthcare crisis besetting world capitalism. Regardless of which bloc wins a majority, the next government will be a regime of escalating militarism abroad and social reaction and repression at home.

The aim of Blue and White leader Bennie Gantz, Israel's deputy and alternate prime minister, is to put pressure on Netanyahu to agree a two-year budget for 2020, as agreed in the coalition agreement, before the December 23 deadline that would automatically trigger an election within three months. Three top finance ministry officials have resigned, citing their frustration over the party-political bickering, while in the absence of a budget Israel is using a pro-rated version of the 2019 budget.

According to opinion polls, only about 30 percent of Israelis believe Netanyahu has handled the pandemic effectively, with Israel recording more than 345,000 COVID-19 cases and nearly 3,000 deaths, mostly in the last three months. After the government lifted an early lockdown without adequate safety precautions and in defiance of recommendations by the country's health experts, cases began to soar, leading to a second partial lockdown in September. Now, after an early lifting of those limited closures, the number of infections is again on the rise, prompting talk of a third lockdown.

The situation is worse in the occupied Palestinian Territories for which Israel is legally responsible. The West Bank has recorded nearly 100,000 COVID-19

cases and around 700 deaths, mostly in the last few months, and has run out of testing kits to screen patients. The Palestinian Authority has announced a week-long closure of all but essential services in four of the 11 provinces.

In the besieged Gaza enclave, the situation is catastrophic. Healthcare workers have run out of testing kits and the only laboratory able to analyse COVID-19 test samples stopped its work "due to a lack of equipment" amid a spike in cases in the last few weeks. The healthcare system is on the point of collapse as the number of confirmed cases has reached 25,000 and 150 people have died, prompting the Hamas-led government to announce a lockdown, starting Friday, on weekends, and to close schools, universities, kindergartens and mosques.

While the vote appears as a defeat for Netanyahu, who has been prime minister since 2009, it signifies the political demise of the opposition led by Gantz. His electoral coalition bloc, made up of former generals and politicians who had previously served under Netanyahu, had fought three elections on an "anyone but Bibi" [Netanyahu's nickname] platform. Branded a "centre left" party, Blue and White and the other small parties in the bloc had no significant differences with Netanyahu on the economy, social conditions, the management of the pandemic or relations with the Palestinians. It is this that has allowed political life in Israel to be dominated by Netanyahu's calculations and maneuvering as to how best to avoid criminal corruption charges that could send him to jail for 10 years.

No party advances any policies to deal with the poverty and social inequality that characterize Israeli society, one of the most unequal among OECD countries. Some 15 percent of workers are unemployed, with the post-lockdown recovery slower than in May and the economy expected to contract by 6 percent in

2020, the first annual contraction in Israel's history.

No party opposes the brutality of the police towards Israel's Palestinian or immigrant communities. Of the 13 people killed by the police last year, 11 were Palestinians and two were of Ethiopian descent. Despite 1,200 brutality complaints a year, just eight police officers were indicted in 2018, the last year for which data is available, and only a handful face disciplinary tribunals.

This is a pale reflection of the treatment meted out to the Palestinians in the West Bank, who face daily intimidation, provocation and violence from settlers and Israeli security forces. Last week, an Israeli soldier shot and killed a 13-year-old Palestinian boy, Ali Abu Aliya, who was protesting against a new settlement outpost near his village. Four other young people were wounded by rubber bullets.

The lack of any genuine opposition leaves Israel under the leadership of a criminally indicted politician openly mired in cronyism and corruption and notorious for his lavish lifestyle--courtesy of expensive presents from businessmen and his stock dealings.

Netanyahu is due to attend court daily in February to give evidence in his defence. Denying the charges, he has called his indictment a frame-up, accused the judicial system of mounting a coup against him at the behest of "leftists," and made several attempts to neuter the judiciary and change the law to evade prosecution. Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, a former close aide of Netanyahu, has faced threats if he doesn't quit or drop charges against the prime minister. Emulating Donald Trump, his patron in the White House, Netanyahu has sought to incite his far-right supporters against demonstrators who have been mounting weekly protests calling for his resignation outside his official residence in Jerusalem, in Tel Aviv and around the country.

When Gantz took Blue and White into a coalition with Netanyahu, citing the need to address the pandemic, it split his electoral bloc and discredited his party. Netanyahu seized every opportunity to smear, humiliate and intimidate Gantz, bypassing him in all the major decisions of state, including the recent "normalization" agreements with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Sudan.

Despite predictions that Likud will lose seats in the next elections, along with defections to a new party

opposed to Netanyahu's continued premiership led by Gideon Sa'ar, Netanyahu is pinning his hopes on the increased support for his former close political ally, Naftali Bennett's right-wing Yamina Party, and the fracturing and demise of Gantz's former allies to return him to power.

Yet another retired army chief of staff, Gadi Eisenkot, following the lead of seven of the last eight army chiefs including Gantz, is seeking to enter politics and form his own party. Eisenkot authored the Dahiyeh Doctrine, named after the southern suburb of Beirut that is Hezbollah's political base. According to this doctrine, should Hezbollah attack Israel, it will retaliate forcefully against Dahiyeh. He was also the architect of Israel bombing campaign against Iranian targets in Syria.

The so-called peace camp has also embraced a former general. Yair Golan, a former deputy army chief of staff, has announced that he is to formally join Meretz, the political arm of Peace Now that was associated with the back-channel negotiations that preceded the 1993 Oslo Accords. The Accords were supposedly meant to inaugurate a new era of peace with Israel through the establishment of a Palestinian state. He entered parliament last year as a supporter of the Democratic Union of Ehud Barak, another former chief of staff and a short-lived prime minister, before joining the Meretz list in April.

Speaking to the daily *Ha'aretz*, Golan said that he would run for the Meretz leadership if the election is held in June. He criticised Meretz for "insisting on remaining a small, separate and purist party. It lacks a real desire for power, or to be part of the government." He added, "Certain forces are trying to drag it into becoming a Jewish-Arab party. These forces need to be calmed and silenced, as I will do my utmost to do in the coming months."



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