

Israel's fourth election in two years dominated by far-right forces

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Israel goes to the polls on March 23, following the failure of the seven-month-old national emergency coalition government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and its allies and Benny Gantz's Blue and White electoral bloc, to set a budget.

Three previous inconclusive elections in the past two years pitted Netanyahu against Gantz's so-called "centre-left" bloc, which fought on an "Anyone but Bibi" [Netanyahu's nickname] slogan without putting forward any alternative or progressive policies.

This time Netanyahu faces a strong challenge from the far right, his former colleagues. These forces have gained strength and moved to fill the vacuum left after Gantz joined and served as Netanyahu's political accomplice in imposing the government's "herd immunity" policies that have created a healthcare and social disaster for Jewish Israelis and Palestinians alike. Having lost all credibility, the centre-left is disintegrating and faces electoral wipeout.

Essentially a ferocious contest between far right parties, the election paves the way for ever escalating militarism abroad and social reaction and repression against the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, its own Palestinians citizens within Israel, and the Jewish working class at home.

Netanyahu's political strategy is dominated by his determination to avoid trial—the evidence sessions are due to start in February when he will have to appear in court—and conviction for corruption, bribery, and breach of trust in three separate cases. This means retaining the premiership at all costs, since a legal quirk allows an indicted prime minister but not a cabinet minister to remain in office and to introduce legislation preventing his trial from going ahead.

He agreed a coalition with Blue and White, promising to introduce a two-year budget and rotate the premiership with Gantz after 18 months, a pledge that everyone knew

he had no intention of honouring. From the start, he had the measure of Gantz and his political allies, who even before the government was assembled abandoned their efforts to introduce legislation to stop Netanyahu from heading a government while under criminal indictment and limit a prime minister's term to a maximum of eight years.

He excluded Gantz and his party from all the major decisions, including the recent normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, so that he could posture as a world statesman and a master foreign policy strategist. He used the pandemic to give himself unprecedented airtime, while taking the credit for obtaining the vaccine and inaugurating a speedy rollout programme that envisages inoculating two million of Israel's nearly 10 million population by the end of January, including all of Israel's over 60s.

The pandemic has thrown a million Israelis out of work, even as business leaders warn that thousands of companies are likely to close and a third partial lockdown has been imposed as the number of cases soar. Israel has reported more than 400,000 infections and 3,226 deaths, the vast majority since August, after the government lifted an early lockdown without adequate safety precautions and in defiance of recommendations by the country's health experts. As cases began to rise, a second, partial lockdown was imposed in September and then lifted a few weeks later.

The situation is far worse in the Palestinian territories, for which Israel is legally responsible. The West Bank has recorded around 134,000 COVID-19 cases and 1,332 deaths, mostly in the last few months. The besieged Gaza enclave has run out of testing kits and the healthcare system is on the point of collapse, as more than 210 people have died.

Netanyahu's fractious cabinet rarely met. Citing the

pandemic as an excuse, he refused to set a two-year budget, prompting three senior finance ministry officials to resign over the political infighting, and precipitating the automatic dissolution of the Knesset on December 23. The government, which has been without a budget, has been operating under a pro-rated 2019 budget.

Gantz nevertheless did everything he could to keep the coalition afloat, agreeing to a three-month budget postponement until December. He reportedly agreed to limit the powers of Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn, a member of his own party, as a concession to the prime minister's Likud party that was seeking to fire Nissenkorn to prevent him from appointing a state attorney and attorney general, whose roles are critical to Netanyahu's criminal trial.

For Netanyahu, precipitating fresh elections before a new budget enables him to continue as caretaker prime minister, whereas a collapse of the coalition after an agreed budget would have given the rotating premiership to Gantz.

Netanyahu had hoped to profit from the latter's vanishing popularity and form a more sympathetic coalition that could ensure his immunity from prosecution. But that hope has now been upended by his two former proteges turned rivals: Gideon Sa'ar and Naftali Bennett. Seizing the opportunity presented by the discrediting of Gantz's bloc, right-winger Sa'ar, who last year challenged Netanyahu in a Likud leadership contest, established New Hope as his own political vehicle. He has stated his refusal to sit with Netanyahu in a future coalition. Sa'ar has the support of several Likud ministers, including Netanyahu's key political ally, the far right, religious and pro-settler Ze'ev Elkin, who is committed to a Greater Israel policy, as well as other Likud legislators and members anxious to see the end of Netanyahu's reign.

Sa'ar is to the right of Netanyahu, having openly opposed the 1982 evacuation of Israeli settlements in Sinai as part of the peace deal with Egypt, the so-called "two-state" solution, and Israel's unilateral pullout from Gaza in 2005 and supported the annexation of the West Bank which Israel has illegally occupied since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. As Interior Minister, he oversaw the deportation of more African asylum seekers than any other official.

Bennet, another former Likud member who now heads the religious Yamina Party, has now announced his intention to seek the premiership. Together with Avigdor Lieberman's nationalist Israel Beiteinu, the ultra-religious

parties and defectors from Gantz's Blue and White Party, they have the potential to unseat Netanyahu.

In the meantime, Netanyahu is constantly provoking Iran ahead of US President-elect Joseph Biden's inauguration and the possible resumption of talks to revise the nuclear agreement. It is widely accepted that Israel's Mossad was behind the assassination of Iran's chief nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh earlier this month. It comes in the wake of the much-publicized US-brokered "peace deal" with several Arab states that is part of the Trump administration's broad anti-Iranian axis being formed in preparation for a potentially catastrophic war aimed at regime-change in Tehran, and rolling back Chinese and Russian influence in the resource-rich Middle East and North Africa.

The normalization of commercial and diplomatic relations with Israel, including the first direct flights to the UAE and the right to use Saudi airspace, has prompted increasing concerns in Tehran of Israeli encirclement. It fears that the petro-state will provide Israel with a secret forward base for use against Iran amid Israel's close cooperation with Azerbaijan, Iran's neighbour on the Caspian Sea, where Israeli weaponry played a key role in the recent fighting against Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Israel has stepped up its provocations against Iran after Tehran blamed Israel for Fakhri-zadeh's assassination and warned that it would not stay idle while its neighbours build up their military strength. A few days ago, an Israeli submarine passed through the Suez Canal in coordination with Egypt en route for the Persian Gulf. Speaking at a military ceremony, Israel's army chief of staff General Aviv Kochavi threatened a stiff response against Iran and its allies. This was followed two days later by Netanyahu insisting that Israel would not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Israel continues to bomb Iranian-linked targets in Syria, while the Israel Defense Forces have been placed on a state of high alert, reportedly because of a possible US attack on Iran.



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