Israel’s election: Political gridlock as fascistic party gains seats

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud Party has won the largest number of seats, but without gaining the 61-seat majority needed to form a coalition government. His political opponents, a diverse collection of right-wing and nominally centre, and left-wing parties, are likewise unlikely to be able to form a majority.

Naftali Bennett’s right-wing Yamina (seven seats) and Mansour Abbas’s Islamist United Arab List party (six seats) have yet to declare their support, making them potential “kingmakers” in coalition negotiations.

With some 10 percent of the vote—the double-sealed ballots of soldiers, prisoners and COVID patients—still to be counted in an electoral system that requires parties to achieve at least 3.25 percent of the vote to enter parliament and allocates the number of seats in proportion to the number of votes, the final result is not expected until Thursday evening.

It seems likely that Israel is set for weeks of political horse trading, while the possibility of an unprecedented fifth election next autumn cannot be ruled out.

The unclear result in Israel’s fourth election in two years reflects the ongoing fragmentation and stampede to the right of Israeli politics, with the explicitly right-wing and far-right forces—bitterly divided among themselves over their support for or opposition to Netanyahu—winning 72 seats in the 120 seat Knesset. The “centrist” parties won 25 seats and the nominal lefts, Labour and Meretz, focusing heavily on identity politics, increased their seats to 12.

The result testifies to the profound political crisis of the Israeli state and the absence of any means within the political establishment for the working class, Jewish and Arab, to express its social concerns and interests. While the economic circumstances are different, courtesy of its paymaster in Washington, “the only democracy in the Middle East” is no more able to agree a functioning government than its northern neighbour, Lebanon.

Tuesday’s election followed the collapse of Netanyahu’s national emergency coalition with former Israel Defence Forces chief of staff Benny Gantz’s Blue and White Party. Gantz had fought three elections opposing Netanyahu’s continued premiership, who will shortly appear in court to defend himself against numerous corruption charges over attempts to secure favourable media coverage, only to be bought off with Netanyahu’s promise of a rotating premiership, splitting his own party and political bloc in the process.

Such was the distrust between the various coalition members that the cabinet rarely met and had failed to agree the appointment of the state attorney, senior officials at the justice and finance ministries and other positions. But it was the failure to set a two-year budget—Israel has now been without a budget for more than two years—as agreed in the coalition agreement, that triggered the election.

While 30+ parties, many led by Likud dissidents or politicians who had previously served under Netanyahu, contested the elections, none of them—right, left, or centre—had any substantive differences with Netanyahu. The election was therefore a choice between a diverse grouping of right-wing oppositionists or a far-right incumbent in cahoots with outright fascists, religious bigots and Jewish supremacists.

Once the count is confirmed, President Reuven Rivlin will meet the leaders of the various parliamentary parties and choose the party leader with the best chance of forming a stable majority coalition. If unable to form a government in 42 days, Rivlin can designate another leader to form a government. If that too fails, yet another election must be held.

The turnout, at 67 percent, was the lowest since 2009, with far fewer Arab citizens voting. According to *Ha’aretz’s* latest figures, Likud has won 30 seats and the religious parties Shas, United Torah Judaism and

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Religious Zionism have won nine, seven and six seats respectively. Of those opposed to Netanyahu, Yesh Atid has won 17 seats, Blue and White eight, Israel Beiteinu and Labour seven each, New Hope six, Meretz five and the Arab Joint List six.

It is a measure of the rightward lurch of official politics and the collapse of what passes for the left that the fascistic Religious Zionism won almost as many seats as Labour, the founding party of the State of Israel that governed the country for 30 years.

Religious Zionism is part of Netanyahu's far-right alliance that also includes the openly racist Jewish Power—the political heir of Meir Kahane's Kach party that was banned as a terrorist organization—and the ultra-conservative religious and homophobic Noam. Religious Zionism advocates the expulsion of the Palestinian population, violence against Arabs and the eradication of secularism and intermarriage.

Should Netanyahu be able to form a government, Itamar Ben-Gvir, Religious Zionism's number three, will likely be given a ministerial position, alongside the alliance's leader, Bezalel Smotrich. A lawyer, Ben Gvir is best known for defending settlers accused of Jewish terror attacks and hate crimes against Palestinians and for representing Lehava, an organization that fights Jewish intermarriage with non-Jews.

These are the forces Netanyahu depends on for a majority, in his bid to acquire parliamentary immunity, neuter the judiciary and the Supreme Court and avoid trial and likely imprisonment, as Israel lurches to ever more authoritarian forms of rule.

Netanyahu has previously railed against Israel's Palestinian citizens, about one fifth of the population, denouncing them for "voting in droves" and enacting the Jewish Nation-State Law that enshrined their second-class citizen status. But despite his denials this does not fully exclude striking a deal with the United Arab List, which has recently cooperated with the government in the Knesset and split from the Joint Arab List, calling for more policing to prevent crime in Arab towns and villages.

Yair Lapid, leader of the nominally centrist and opposition party Yesh Atid, has indicated his willingness to rely on the Joint Arab List's support in a future coalition, which would be the first time a Palestinian party has ever been part of a governing coalition.

Absent from the campaign was any discussion about the long-running conflict with the Palestinians, the creeping de facto annexation of the West Bank, or the economic and social catastrophe facing the working class. Some 17 percent of Israelis were unemployed in February as Netanyahu reopened the economy to ensure a "feel good" election. According to a recent Israel Democracy Institute survey, only 24 percent of Israelis viewed the government's handling of the public health crisis positively, with even fewer approving its measures to mitigate economic and social fallout.

Instead, Netanyahu focused his campaign almost exclusively on a massive vaccine rollout, bought at enormous cost to the taxpayer, in which around 5.2 million Israelis have received their first shot and 4.2 million (46 percent of the population) the second shot.

This election, Netanyahu found himself without open political support from the incoming Biden administration in the US, unlike Donald Trump's numerous political gifts. Trump's support included recognizing Israel's sovereignty over Syria's Golan Heights captured in 1967, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, launching the "deal of the century" that ignored the Palestinians, sanctioning Israel's annexation of 30 percent of the West Bank, and the facilitating of the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco.

Biden supported Israel against the International Criminal Court's announcement that it would open an investigation into war crimes against Gaza and the Palestinians. But the Democrats clearly hoped for a more reliable Middle East partner to emerge out of the election. It took President Biden four weeks from taking office before he finally rang Netanyahu, whose intimate association with Trump is a problem domestically, but by no means an insuperable one.

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