

Netanyahu and establishment parties pave way for rise of far-right in Israel's election

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Israel goes to the polls Tuesday for the fifth time in three and a half years. The general election takes place amid rising class tensions within Israel and the occupied territories, the Middle East and internationally.

Opinion polls are predicting that the Likud Party, headed by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, will once again win the largest number of seats in the 120-seat Knesset, with interim Prime Minister Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid Party taking second place.

Nevertheless, the outcome, in terms of which political bloc will be able to form a government, is too close to call. The result will largely depend on the surging vote for the far-right, fascistic forces led by Jewish Power legislator Itamar Ben Gvir and his Religious Zionism partner Bezalel Smotrich, who are allied with Netanyahu, and the plunging support for the traditional parties of the "left", and the Arab parties competing for the votes of Israel's Palestinian citizens making up 20 percent of its 9.3 million population.

The 5.5 million Palestinians who live under the gun in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza have no vote, although the 700,000 or so Israeli settlers that live there do.

Today's elections were called last June, one year after the formation in June 2021 of yet another unstable coalition with a majority of one after the 73-year-old Netanyahu—on trial for corruption, fraud and breach of trust for his actions while serving as prime minister—proved unable to form a coalition despite his Likud Party winning the most seats in the 120-seat Knesset.

United only in their opposition to Netanyahu, the coalition consisted of eight disparate parties, spanning most of Israel's mainstream parties, including those ostensibly committed to the Oslo Accords and a Palestinian mini-state—Meretz, Labor, Yesh Atid and Blue and White—and included for the first time one of Israel's

Arab parties, Ra'am.

In a rotten deal aimed at ousting Netanyahu and securing the support of some of the secular rightwing parties, Yair Lapid, whose Yesh Atid Party won the second largest number of seats, ceded the premiership to Naftali Bennett, a former settlers' leader, even though his party won only six seats, and agreed not to negotiate with the Palestinians over statehood for the duration of their alliance.

What passes for Israel's left and centrist parties then proceeded to participate in an ever-sharper lurch to the right, an escalation of Israel's covert wars against Iran and its allies, Syria and Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iran, the Persian Gulf, Syria and the eastern Mediterranean—and its attacks on the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, including administrative detention without charge, house demolitions, land theft, almost daily raids and mass arrest operations, collective punishment and trampling on basic human rights.

In June, as Bennett faced mounting opposition from his own right-wing ministers, Netanyahu's opposition bloc engineered a parliamentary manoeuvre aimed at bringing down the government and securing his return to power. Following the coalition's collapse and in accordance with their coalition deal, Lapid replaced Bennett as caretaker prime minister until the elections set for November 1 and the formation of a new government that could take weeks if not months to negotiate. Bennett, with his party—now led by strident right-winger Ayelet Shaked—viewed as unlikely to cross the minimum threshold to qualify for any seats in the Knesset, promptly announced his resignation from politics.

The elections come amid key domestic issues, including the annual budget for 2023 that must find cuts in services to fund a pay rise awarded to teachers to avert a national strike at the start of the school year and the health, economic and social fallout from the continuing

COVID-19 pandemic that has killed nearly 12,000 people and is on the rise following the lifting of restrictions.

The skyrocketing cost of living and rental charges, among the highest in the advanced countries, is making it hard for Israelis and Palestinians alike to put food on the table.

Israel's ruling elite, the dozen or so wealthy families that dominate economic life, has refused to lift a finger to alleviate the mounting social and economic suffering.

The beneficiaries have been the far-right, fascistic forces of Ben Gvir and Smotrich who support ethnic cleansing, with the media amplifying their every word. It was Netanyahu who engineered their entry into the Knesset to bolster his bloc prior to the 2021 elections.

These racists, the ideological successors of the banned Kahanist movement, are forming vigilante groups in Israel's Negev and Bat Yam, an impoverished Tel Aviv suburb, and inciting pogrom-like violence against the Palestinians in both the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, and in Israel's mixed towns and cities. Ben-Gvir was filmed recently pulling out a handgun during a campaign stop in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, where he demanded the police fire on the residents.

Their Jewish supremacist agenda includes Israeli rule over the West Bank, the expulsion of Israel's Palestinian population, the demolition of the al-Aqsa Mosque to make way for the building of a Jewish Temple, and the imposition of religious law.

Both leaders support the introduction of a "French Law" that bars criminal investigations into a sitting prime minister, with Ben Gvir, a lawyer who defends Jewish extremists, supporting retrospective legislation that would end Netanyahu's trial. Netanyahu, taking his cue from former US President Donald Trump, has called his trial a "rigged" political witch-hunt by a leftist judiciary.

This has been enough to guarantee them key posts in a Netanyahu-led government that would remove any remaining restraints on the imposition of direct military rule over the Palestinians. They constitute a serious threat to the Israeli and Palestinian working class, strengthening the far-right forces in the state apparatus and in society that are already terrorizing immigrants, refugees and human rights and left-wing activists. Netanyahu and the media's cultivation of these forces demonstrate that the ruling class, like its counterparts internationally, is preparing for the violent suppression of social and political resistance, for which it needs the fascists.

Their rise has been aided by the refusal of the Labor Party, the nominally left parties and the corporatist trade

unions to lift a finger to defend the living standards of working people. Similarly, the four Arab parties face dwindling support and voter apathy. Mansour Abbas, the leader of the conservative Islamist party Ra'am, was the first leader of an Arab party to join a coalition government based on the promise of funding for Israel's impoverished Arab towns and cities and pledges to tackle inequality that proved to be little more than empty words. Should the Arab parties fall below the electoral threshold, it would further weaken the links between the Arab working class and its traditional leaders that have bound them to the State of Israel.

Workers, Jewish and Arab, face the complete dead-end of bourgeois politics. All the establishment parties and the trade unions have acted against the interests of the working class, slashing expenditure on education, health, essential public services and the social safety net, while overseeing a massive decline in the living standards of those on lower incomes and pensions. Workers also face the catastrophic consequences of the pandemic, climate change that has brought drought, fires and floods, and the war against Russia that threatens to draw Israel/Palestine and the entire Middle East into the front line.

Resistance is growing. The ruling class is preparing for this by giving carte blanche to the military to behave with impunity, as the recent murder of *Al-Jazeera* journalist Shireen Abu Akleh and the mass closures and raid and arrest operations in the West Bank have demonstrated, giving succour to the fascists and turning to authoritarian forms of rule.

The Israeli and Arab working class must prepare for this by uniting in the struggle against the rising cost of living and social cuts, combining this with the struggle against militarism, fascism and their cause, capitalism. This requires the building in Israel and throughout the Middle East sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution.



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