

Alliance with fascist party returns Benjamin Netanyahu to power in Israel

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With 95 percent of the votes counted, former Prime Minister and Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu is on track to form a government with the help of his far-right, fascist allies Religious Zionism after Israel's fifth election in less than four years.

Netanyahu's Likud Party looks set to win 32 seats, an increase of two seats on last year's election. His political ally, the fascist Religious Zionism, led by Bezalel Smotrich in alliance with Itamar Ben-Gvir's Jewish Power, is likely to gain 14 seats, an increase of eight, making it the third largest party. Together with the seats of the other religious parties, United Torah Judaism (UTJ) and Shas, this would give him a majority of four to five seats in the 120-seat Knesset. Crucially, depending on the final count, Likud, as the minority partner, will be beholden to the religious parties.

The scandal-ridden Netanyahu, who is embroiled in three separate court cases on charges of corruption, fraud and breach of trust and views a return to power as a means of introducing legislation that will end his trial, told supporters at his Likud Party election headquarters, "We are on the brink of a very big victory. The people want power, not weakness."

Yair Lapid, caretaker prime minister and leader of Yesh Atid, the second largest party and head of the opposition bloc, is likely to have 24 seats, up seven on last year's election. Even with the support of Mansour Abbas's Ra'am Party, by no means assured, this leaves him with 50 seats, as his partners, the right-wing Yamina Party led by Ayelet Shaked, and the liberal Meretz, led by Nitzan Horowitz, failed to meet the 3.25 percent of the total vote needed under Israel's system of proportional representation to win at least one seat.

The rout of Israel's leftist forces is such that the movement that founded the State of Israel—the Labour

Party—won just four seats compared with Religious Zionism's projected 14.

Despite a lacklustre campaign, the turnout topped 71 percent, the highest since 2015, six elections ago. Arab Israelis voted in higher numbers than expected, topping 50 percent. On Wednesday, ahead of the final results to be announced at the end of the week, Lapid asked his office to prepare to hand over the reins and cancelled his trip to next week's Cop27 climate conference in Egypt.

Tuesday's elections were called last June, one year after the formation in June 2021 of a fragile coalition after Netanyahu proved unable to cobble together a coalition despite his Likud Party winning the most seats. United only in their opposition to Netanyahu, it consisted of eight disparate parties, including those ostensibly committed to the Oslo Accords (1993-95) and a Palestinian mini-state—Meretz, Labour, Yesh Atid and Blue and White—and included for the first time one of Israel's Arab parties, Ra'am.

To secure the support of some of the secular right-wing parties away from Netanyahu, 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 the latter's party won only six seats, and agreed not to negotiate with the Palestinians over statehood for the duration of their alliance.

The Bennett-Lapid-led "government of change" continued Netanyahu's pro-business agenda, including lifting all measures aimed at restricting the spread of the pandemic.

The "government of change" presided over more killings of Palestinians in the occupied territories than at any time since 2005—including the deliberate targeting of US-Palestinian *Al-Jazeera* journalist

Shireen Abu-Akleh—more administrative detentions and more house demolitions than the last few years of Netanyahu’s period in office. It advanced the ethnic cleansing of Masafer Yatta, carried out almost daily raid and mass arrest operations, collective punishment, and designated six leading Palestinian NGOs as “terrorists”. It escalated Israel’s covert wars against Iran and its allies, Syria and Lebanon’s Hezbollah—in Iran, the Persian Gulf, Syria and the eastern Mediterranean.

None of this was enough for Bennett’s right-wing ministers, prompting Netanyahu to engineer a parliamentary manoeuvre to bring down the government and secure his return to power. Following the coalition’s collapse in June and in accordance with their coalition deal, Lapid replaced Bennett as caretaker prime minister pending the outcome of Tuesday’s elections, while Bennett resigned from politics.

The failure of the “anyone but Netanyahu” coalition to put forward any real alternative to alleviate a social inequality level that is one of the highest in the OECD group of advanced countries is determined by its class position as representative of Israel’s oligarchs against the working class, both Jewish and Palestinian, within Israel’s internationally recognised borders and the occupied territories.

The beneficiaries have been the far-right, fascistic forces of Ben Gvir and Smotrich, aided and abetted by Netanyahu, who brokered their alliance and 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 that was designated a terrorist organisation in the US, 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 the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as in Israel’s mixed towns and cities. Their Jewish supremacist agenda includes Israeli rule over the West Bank, the expulsion of what they call “disloyal” Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up 20 percent of the country’s population, the demolition of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the building of a Jewish Temple, the imposition of religious law and the destruction of the judicial system.

Both leaders support the introduction of a law barring

criminal investigations into a sitting prime minister. This is expected to guarantee them key posts in a Netanyahu-led government—they have already lobbied for control of the justice, defence, finance, and public security ministries—that would remove any remaining restraints on the imposition of direct military rule over the Palestinians.

Ben-Gvir celebrated his party’s success, telling his supporters in Jerusalem that “it’s time to be the owners of this country again,” and “I’m still not prime minister.” He said that people who voted for religious Zionism “want to walk safely on the street, not to have our soldiers and police officers restrained, [and] seek to completely separate those who are loyal to the State of Israel and those who undermine its existence.” Some witnesses claimed that the crowd chanted “death to Arabs” alongside the more prevalent calls for “death to terrorists.”

While Netanyahu could avoid being beholden to these fascist forces by trying to form a coalition with some of the parties in the opposition bloc that have previously served under him, this is thought to be unlikely.

The Biden administration, despite its well known dislike of Netanyahu and supposed support for the Oslo Accords, has been reluctant to even criticise the possibility of Ben-Gvir’s potential inclusion in a coalition government, with State Department Spokesperson Ned Price saying on Monday, “No matter the shape of the Israeli coalition and government, our relationship will be strong and enduring.”

Following the election, a US National Security Council spokesperson said, “We are pleased to see such strong voter turnout for the Knesset election. It is too early to speculate on the exact composition of the next governing coalition until all the votes are counted. We look forward to continuing to work with the Israeli government on our shared interests and values.”



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