

Netanyahu strikes deal with fascistic Religious Zionism in bid to form Israeli government

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Following the victory of his right-wing bloc in last month's election, opposition leader and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has signed a series of deals with factions of the fascistic and racist Religious Zionism, now the third largest party in the 120-seat Knesset.

He has moved closer to creating what would be the most rightwing and reactionary government in Israel's history. He has until December 11 to form a government, though he is expected to request a two-week extension from President Isaac Herzog.

Such a government heralds a stepped-up war against the Palestinians, the strengthening of Jewish supremacy and the implementation of measures synonymous with apartheid, further undermining the democratic rights of both Palestinian and Israeli workers and intensifying the social tinderbox that is Israel-Palestine today.

The November 1 election was the fifth in four years as no party since 2019 had been able to form a stable coalition. It was precipitated by the collapse last June of the fragile coalition with a one seat majority headed by Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett out of eight parties united only by opposition to the scandal-ridden Netanyahu.

Their "government of change" that included Labour and Meretz, both ostensibly committed to a mini-Palestinian statelet alongside Israel, continued Netanyahu's aggressive stance towards the Palestinians as well as his pro-business agenda on behalf of Israel's plutocrats, including lifting all measures aimed at restricting the spread of the pandemic.

According to the United Nations, it has presided over more killings of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories in 2022 than at any time since 2005. Israeli forces and settlers have killed 139 Palestinians, including at least 30 children, in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including the deliberate targeting of US-Palestinian *Al-Jazeera* journalist Shireen Abu-Akleh. Israel's three-day bombardment of Gaza in August killed a further 49

Palestinians, including 17 children.

Under the Lapid-Bennett government, Israeli security forces carried out more administrative detentions and more house demolitions than in the last few years of Netanyahu's tenure. It advanced the ethnic cleansing of Masafer Yatta, conducted almost daily raid and mass arrest operations, imposed collective punishments on the Palestinians 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.

The "government of change's" failure to put forward any policies to alleviate social inequality—one of the highest in the OECD group of advanced countries—flowed from its class position as representative of Israel's oligarchs against the working class, Jewish and Palestinian.

The political beneficiaries have been the far-right, fascistic forces of Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, leaders of Religious Zionism, an alliance of three groups, aided and abetted by Netanyahu who brokered their merger to enable their entry into the Knesset to bolster his bloc prior to the 2021 elections. Following last month's elections, the party has split into its three constituent parts: Religious Zionism, Jewish Power and Noam.

According to Davar's recent socioeconomic analysis of the 25th Knesset election results, the surge in support for the far-right Religious Zionism and the secular right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu came from the higher income groups that have traditionally supported the official "centrist" and "leftist" parties. It was the three wealthiest deciles that provided the bulk of the votes for the centrist and left parties in the Lapid-Bennett coalition.

The two strongest parties among the lowest income groups are the United Torah Judaism party that is part of Netanyahu's bloc which has its main support base among the ultra-orthodox or Haredi Jews, with about 20 percent

of the vote, and the Muslim Brotherhood-linked United Arab List, with about 15.5 percent. Both groups, Israel's ultra-orthodox and Arab citizens, are the poorest in the country. Together, the two parties received about three quarters of the votes in the three lowest economic deciles, with almost no votes from upper income workers.

While Netanyahu's Likud Party secured the largest number of seats at 32, he depends on Religious Zionism (14) and the two parties whose support base lies with the orthodox Jews, Shas (11) and United Torah Judaism (7), to form a government with a four-seat majority in the Knesset.

Currently on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases, he welcomes in particular Religious Zionism's willingness to introduce a law preventing a sitting prime minister from being indicted while in office. Other parties that have no substantive policy disagreements with him have refused to serve under an indicted prime minister.

In a series of deals, Netanyahu has offered key posts to legislators in Religious Zionism, which is committed to annexing the West Bank that Israel has illegally occupied, along with East Jerusalem, Gaza and the Syrian Golan Heights, since the 1967 Arab Israeli war. It pledges to expel "disloyal" Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up 20 percent of the country's population, demolish the al-Aqsa Mosque to make way for the building of a Jewish Temple, impose religious law and destroy the judicial system.

Netanyahu's first deal was with the extreme-right Jewish Power party, making its leader, Itamar Ben-Gvir, the new national security minister. Ben Gvir, who regularly incites violence against the Palestinians, chanting "Death to the Arabs," has faced dozens of charges of hate speech. Until a couple of years ago, he kept a picture in his house of the Israeli-American terrorist Baruch Goldstein, who in 1994 massacred 29 Palestinians and wounded 125 others while they were praying in Hebron.

This disciple of the American-born fascist Meir Kahane, whose movement was banned in Israel and declared a terrorist organization by the United States, will be given control over the police and other forces, including the Border Police unit that operates in the West Bank and the force that controls security at al-Aqsa Mosque. This gives Ben Gvir, who has already set up a vigilante group in the Negev and has sought to do so in Bat Yam, an impoverished suburb of Tel Aviv, a free pass to set up an anti-Palestinian militia.

Netanyahu's second deal was with Avi Maoz, the sole member in the Knesset of the Noam faction. Notorious for his racist, homophobic and misogynist views, he will become a deputy minister in the prime minister's office heading a newly created body charged with the task of promoting "Jewish identity." Last week, Maoz said he would try to cancel the annual gay pride parade in Jerusalem, which he described as "an obscene abomination." He will have authority to approve or expunge external content programmes from the list currently offered to Israeli schools.

Netanyahu has also signed a deal with Religious Zionism leader Bezalel Smotrich. A lawyer, he has defended settlers accused of incitement and provocations against the Palestinians. He advocates a shoot-to-kill policy for the military when dealing with Palestinians throwing stones. When he was asked what he would do should there be another intifada and a Palestinian child were to throw stones, he replied, "Either I will shoot him, or I will jail him, or I will expel him." He played a key role in outlawing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement in Israel, banning its advocates from even visiting the country. Along with leaders of the other religious parties, he is seeking to reform the judicial system to ensure that it is consistent with Jewish religious tradition.

This provocateur had originally demanded the defence portfolio a step too far for the Biden administration and is to become finance minister. As a further sweetener, his party will also get a ministerial position within the defence ministry responsible for the agencies overseeing the construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Palestinian and Israeli civilian life in the Occupied Territories. In effect, Religious Zionism will have almost complete control over the West Bank.

Washington is keen to laud the virtues of democracy and human rights when opposing its enemies, yet is unphased by its attack dog in the Middle East espousing openly racist and anti-democratic policies. On Sunday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the Biden administration would judge Israel's incoming far-right government based on its policies, not the people in it—in other words: business as usual.



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