

Israel holds most right-wing elections in its history

By Jean Shaoul
9 April 2019

The elections taking place today in Israel are the most right-wing in its 71-year history.

The country that claims to be the only democracy in the Middle East is offering its electorate a choice—openly fascist policies or redoubled militarism—to ensure a Jewish majority in Israel/Palestine.

The rival campaigns are inextricably linked to the Greater Israel project of Zionist expansion upon which the wealth of Israel's elite depends.

That in turn necessarily involves the further displacement and suppression of the Palestinians in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, the economic cost of which is to be borne by both the Palestinian and Jewish Israeli working class.

While Israel's nine million citizens, including its 1.8 million Palestinian citizens, have the right to vote, those most affected—the 370,000 permanent residents of East Jerusalem, illegally annexed after the June 1967 war, the five million Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and the Syrians in the occupied Golan Heights, all of whom are subject to Israeli military rule, some five million in total—are barred from the polls.

The timing of the election is bound up with the thoroughly corrupt nature of Israeli political and economic life, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announcing an early election in December to face down Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit over his expected indictment for corruption in several serious cases. They centre on his dealings with businessmen to whom he allegedly granted regulatory concessions in return for lavish gifts or favourable news coverage.

Netanyahu joins a long line of Israel's leading politicians tainted, if not convicted, of corruption and other charges. As in every country, including Israel's patron the US, corruption and criminality have become the norm, as politicians seek both personal gain and political power for themselves and their sponsors.

The indictment of a sitting prime minister is evidence of the terminal decay of Israeli democracy, which has withered

in the face of the twin pressures of the decades-long military suppression of the Palestinian people and the rising social inequality within Israel itself, which ranks among the highest in the developed world.

Despite Mandelblit's February announcement of his intention to prosecute the prime minister, Netanyahu refused to resign, claiming he was the victim of a "deep-state putsch." If he wins the election despite the indictment, he will take it as a mandate to strengthen his position and purge the legal apparatus in such a way as to enable him to get off scot-free. He is expected to introduce a retrospective bill that would make it impossible to prosecute a sitting prime minister for fraud, bribery and breach of trust.

Such is the fractured and unstable nature of Israeli politics that some 40 parties are contesting the elections, as parties splinter and regroup in new and ever more right-wing alliances. Most are nothing more than personal political vehicles for politicians on the make, and few last longer than a couple of electoral campaigns. Because the electorate votes for party lists and not individual candidates, and a party list must achieve a minimum of 3.25 per cent of the popular vote, in practice only about a dozen parties will make it into the 120-seat Knesset, Israel's parliament.

As no party has ever won an outright majority, the largest party must also be able to assemble a coalition capable of securing at least 61 votes in the Knesset. This, combined with the electoral threshold, requires the building of electoral alliances, without which the largest party may not in practice be able to form a government.

Netanyahu embodies the emergence of a fascist tendency within Israel. He heads a coalition made up of openly racist and fascist parties that last year introduced the so-called "Nation-State Law," enshrining Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state, at the expense of Israel's Palestinian citizens, as part the Zionist state's determination to build an ethnocentric society by means of apartheid-style oppression of the Palestinian people.

More recently, Netanyahu formed an electoral alliance with the fascist and anti-Arab terrorist Jewish Power party to

bolster his support in the forthcoming elections. They, and the other small parties in his electoral bloc that represent the settlers, ultra-nationalists, Jewish supremacists and ultra-orthodox, have every intention of taking advantage of his weakened position to extort further concessions for their own supporters.

Two of his cabinet members, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked and Education Minister Naftali Bennett, have quit their own nationalist-religious “Jewish Home” to launch their “New Right” party that is part of Netanyahu’s electoral bloc. Shaked has made it her stated aim to limit the power of Israel’s judiciary, while strengthening the influence of both the executive and the Knesset over the courts. Bennett wants to free the armed forces of all legal constraints, declaring that they fear prosecution more than Hamas officials, and that they cannot properly defend the country with their hands tied by “legalized” thinking.

Despite early polls predicting a comfortable win for Netanyahu and his Likud party, he has faced unexpectedly strong opposition from a slate of generals assembled by the so-called Blue and White coalition, headed by former chief of staff Benny Gantz.

Gantz’s coalition includes the main opposition bloc, the Zionist Union, whose main faction is the Labor Party headed by Avi Gabbay, who dumped his alliance partner, Tzipni Livni, leader of the Hatnua Party, on live television in the hope of salvaging his party, which is hemorrhaging supporters. With both parties facing electoral wipe-out with the official burial of the so-called two-state solution—their original *raison d’être* and swan song—following President Donald Trump’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, Livni and her Hatnua withdrew from the elections and political life.

While Gantz is viewed as the great white hope of the “peace camp” to unseat a prime minister mired in corruption, he has stressed his credentials as Mr. Security, who had taken a tough line on Hamas in Israel’s murderous wars on Gaza in 2012 and 2014. His election slogans are “Only the strong win” and “Israel Before Everything”—indicating that no crime is too great for Israel’s ruling elite.

This merchant of death speaks in vague terms about “striving for peace” and—if that proves impossible—shaping a “new reality.” This is nothing less than a promise to Netanyahu’s nationalist base to expand the West Bank settlement blocs, already home to 450,000 Israeli settlers, and retain control of the Jordan Valley, a strategic section of the West Bank.

To counter the Blue and White bloc, Netanyahu has leveraged Trump’s support to appeal to his right-wing support base, announcing his intention of extending Israeli

sovereignty over the West Bank, captured in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, if he is re-elected. Giving succour to his support base among fascistic layers of the settlers and religious nationalists will drive Israel’s capitalist political setup ever further towards outright apartheid, fascism and military dictatorship. It is a prelude to intensified Israeli military aggression in the occupied West Bank, Gaza and the broader Middle East.

Gantz, for his part, has not challenged Netanyahu’s annexation pledge, resorting to verbal obfuscations and calls for a “regional conference” or “secure separation,” thereby signifying consent.

Almost entirely missing from the election campaign is any mention of the economic and social problems facing the working class, let alone any solutions to the soaring cost of housing that sparked the 2011 demonstrations, overcrowded hospitals and schools and the totally inadequate transportation systems. Wracked by social tensions, Israel has the highest poverty rate of any of the so-called developed countries, and the most extreme social inequality, with the exception of the United States, leading to mounting working class protests and strikes.

The ever more corrupt, fascistic and militaristic nature of Israel’s political parties—in a country whose founding was defended with the claim that it would provide a refuge from fascism and anti-Semitism—mirrors similar trends internationally and demonstrates the bankruptcy and reactionary dead-end of the entire Zionist project.

Jewish and Arab workers in Israel and throughout the region must reject such forces and unite in a common struggle to overthrow the Zionist state and the various bourgeois Arab regimes in the region and replace them with a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

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