No clear winner in Israeli elections

By Barry Grey
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Exit polls released after the end of voting Tuesday evening in Israel's national elections gave conflicting projections, with most giving opposition candidate Benny Gantz a narrow victory over the four-term incumbent prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

However, one poll projected a tie, and a majority of polls indicated that Netanyahu's Likud party would have an easier time putting together a majority coalition with other right-wing and far-right parties in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, than Gantz and his Blue and White party would have assembling a so-called "center-left" ruling coalition.

The term "center-left" is a misnomer, since the choice presented to the electorate was between a far-right incumbent lurching toward outright fascism and an apartheid state and a right-wing former army chief of staff who sought to attack Netanyahu as being weak on national security and boasted of how many Palestinians he had killed in the 2014 Israeli war against Gaza.

The unclear result reflects the profound crisis of the Israeli state and the absence of any means within the Zionist political establishment for the Israeli working class, Jewish and Arab alike, to express its social concerns and interests. Ballots are still being counted, including hundreds of thousands of votes of soldiers, prisoners, hospital patients, poll workers, on-duty police and Israeli diplomats working overseas, and the official result will not be announced until April 17.

Haaretz projected a 37-35 seat plurality for Gantz's party over Netanyahu's Likud, with a total of 61 seats required to form a majority in the 120-seat Knesset. But Gantz's ability to secure a majority coalition was damaged by the collapse of the Labor Party, which secured a historic projected low of only seven seats, the same number as the Israeli Arab coalition Haddash-Ta'al. The virtual disintegration of Israel's founding party, which controlled the government for the first three decades of the country's 71-year history,

is a measure of the rightward movement of the Israeli ruling class and the Zionist project upon which it is based.

Both Gantz and Netanyahu claimed victory and the right to form the next government.

Gantz set up the Blue and White party as an electoral vehicle for elements in the military and big business seeking to oust Netanyahu. He ran alongside two other former military commanders and Yair Lapid, a former television host who heads the centrist party Yesh Atid. Gantz and Lapid issued a joint statement declaring: "These elections have a clear winner and a clear loser. Netanyahu promised 40 seats and lost. The president can see the picture and should call on the winner to form the next government. There is no other option!"

In a tweet, Netanyahu avoided mention of his own apparent loss and focused instead on the combined seats for the Israeli right: "The right-wing bloc led by Likud won a clear victory… I will start assembling a right-wing government with our natural partners this very evening."

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin will begin meeting with the leaders of the various parliamentary parties and designate one of them to form the new government. He is not required to choose the biggest vote-getter, although that is usually the practice. He also takes into account which party and leader have the best chance of forming a stable majority with other parties.

The designated leader has 42 days to form a majority in the parliament. If he or she fails, the president names a different leader and the process is repeated. If neither one can form a majority, a new election must be held in November.

According to *Haaretz*, the projected breakdown of seats in the Knesset is:

* White and Blue: 37
* Likud: 35

*Shas (an ultra-orthodox Sephardic party): 7
* United Torah Judaism: 7
* Hadash-Ta'al: 7
* Labor: 7
* Rightest Union: 5
* Meretz: 5
* Yisrael Beiteinu: 4
* Kalunu: 4

The Kan poll projected that parties on the right would secure a total of 64 seats, as compared to 56 for the so-called center-left (consisting of Blue and White, Labor, Hadash-Ta'al and Meretz).

During the voting, Netanyahu posted an "emergency" video warning that turnout was down 20 percent in Likhud districts and urging right-wing voters not to vote for marginal parties and thus detract from his vote. The alternative, he said, was a "left-wing takeover."

It also came to light that Likhud had mobilized some 1,200 supporters to secretly take cameras to polling places in Arab neighborhoods and film the proceedings, supposedly to ward against voting fraud. Arab leaders, who were desperately seeking to reverse an unusually low turnout among Israeli Arabs, denounced the illegal action as an attempt to intimidate Arab voters. The Central Elections Committee filed a police complaint over the action.

The election campaign was dominated by Netanyahu's increasingly racist and fascistic moves, including his use of snipers to kill hundreds of unarmed Palestinians protesting at the Gaza-Israel border, his repeated attacks on Iranian forces in Syria, and his pledge only days before Election Day to begin annexing the West Bank if reelected.

Netanyahu brought into his electoral coalition the fascist Jewish Power party, which stems from the Kach party of Meir Kahane, banned as a terrorist organization. Jewish Power openly advocates violence against Arabs and the expulsion of the Palestinian population.

He featured in his campaign propaganda his close relations with US President Trump, with billboards and placards showing the two standing side-by-side. Trump intervened openly in favor of Netanyahu, announcing last month US support for Israel's annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights, seized in the 1967 Six Day War, and this week officially designating Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization.

Gantz refused to challenge Netanyahu's promise to begin annexing the West Bank. He chose as his main slogans, "Only the strong win" and "Israel before everything." He made vague statements about pursuing peace with the Palestinians, but said should that fail, he would set about shaping a "new reality"—a clear reference to the expansionist Greater Israel agenda he shares with Netanyahu.

He sought to attack Netanyahu from the right for failing to respond with sufficient force to a handful of rockets fired from Gaza on Israeli towns.

Both sides had little to say about the acute social crisis in Israel, which has the highest official poverty rate, more than 21 percent and over 30 percent for children, of any developed country. Israel is also the second most economically unequal advanced country, topped only by the US.