

Netanyahu prepares to form far-right government in Israel

By Jean Shaoul
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President Reuven Rivlin called on current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to form Israel's next coalition government, following the final confirmation of the general election results on April 17.

Netanyahu's victory marks a watershed, posing a serious threat to the working class in Israel-Palestine and throughout the region, which Rivlin obliquely indicated. "We've been through a difficult election campaign," he said. "A lot of things were said that shouldn't have been said—from all sides—not in a Jewish state, and not in a democratic state."

The election was held amid an escalating political, economic and social crisis. Netanyahu called it ahead of schedule in a desperate gamble to outmaneuver Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit over his expected indictment for corruption for allegedly granting regulatory concessions to businessmen in return for lavish gifts or favourable news coverage.

Netanyahu's Likud Party won 35 seats, with the religious parties winning a further 16, largely at the expense of the far-right.

The Rightist Union that had agreed an alliance—brokered by Netanyahu—with the fascistic Jewish Power party won five seats, Israel Beiteinu five and Kulanu four, giving Netanyahu's right-wing bloc 65 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, compared to 67 in the 2015 elections. Moshe Feiglin's libertarian-nationalist Zehut Party and the New Right, led by outgoing ministers Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, did not make it across the electoral threshold.

Blue and White, the main opposition bloc—an alliance of former generals, led by former Chief of Staff Benny Gantz and Yesh Atid—tied with Likud, winning 35 seats. But with its potential government coalition partners Labour plummeting to just six seats and Meretz five, it was unable to unseat Netanyahu, despite

the stench of corruption surrounding him.

Netanyahu's election pledge to annex the West Bank, occupied illegally since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, signalled his public adoption of the fascistic settlers' and religious nationalists' political agenda.

Israel's blockade of Gaza, aided and abetted by the butcher of Cairo, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and its repeated military assaults on Gaza's defenceless Palestinian citizens, is creating a humanitarian catastrophe. At the same time, repeated aerial strikes on Syria, ostensibly against Hezbollah targets, threaten a far broader conflagration with Iran.

Netanyahu now views his initial indictment hearing, postponed from July to September at his request, as off the table, or at least capable of being dragged out for years.

As it became clear that he and his far-right and ultra-religious partners had won, Netanyahu cynically declared, "I intend to be the prime minister of all the citizens of Israel, right and left, Jews and non-Jews." This comes from someone whose government last year introduced the "Nation-State Law" that enshrines Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state, ends any commitment to equality and openly aligns the state with brutal oppression of an entire people, the Palestinians.

Netanyahu's real agenda is war on all opposition to the dictates of Israel's capitalist elite. On Monday, speaking in the wake of a sickout by a handful of transportation workers that brought rail services to a halt, he pledged to prevent strikes in essential services. Transportation Minister Israel Katz proposed to enact a mandatory arbitration law for essential services.

Nevertheless, major differences between his right-wing partners, particularly over the law to draft

Orthodox Jews into the army, mean that constructing a coalition will not be straightforward.

Two factors dominated the final days of the campaign. The first was the very public interference in the elections by US President Donald Trump in favour of Netanyahu, his regional attack dog. This included:

- His invitation to Netanyahu to visit Washington in the run up to the election and dispatch Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Israel during a tour of the Middle East, both designed to bolster Netanyahu's position as a figure of international significance.

- His recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan heights, captured from Syria in the 1967 war and illegally annexed in 1981.

- His decision on the day of the election to designate Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization, as part of his broader campaign to maximize pressure on Iran.

It is also widely assumed that Netanyahu would not have made his statement junking the "two-state" solution in favour of the outright annexation of the West Bank without encouragement from the White House.

Yet there was no hue and cry over Washington's interference, including from the European Union which has long sought to position itself as a mediator between Israel and the Palestinians.

The second factor was the spineless character of the so-called "opposition," including Labour and Meretz, which sought to profit from popular disgust with Netanyahu's right-wing policies without offering an alternative. They vied with the right-wing bloc to demonstrate their hostility to the Palestinians and Iran, and to compete over who had a more belligerent record against Hamas in Gaza. They demonstrated that the "two-state" solution that had once been their political mantra was dead.

So devastating was the collapse in the share of the vote for Labour, the party that had ruled Israel for the first three decades of the state's existence and briefly re-emerged in the 1990s as the "party of peace," that there are discussions as to whether Labour and Meretz should merge to ensure they pass the polling threshold in future elections.

The opposition had no solution to soaring housing costs, overcrowded hospitals and schools and the inadequate transportation system. In a country wracked

by social tensions, the highest poverty rate of any of the so-called developed countries and mounting anger over the way Israel's banks write off business tycoons' debts at the expense of their ordinary customers, support for the Blue and White coalition and its potential government partners was to be found mainly in the more affluent parts of the country around the Tel Aviv heartland.

Nearly 40 percent of all those eligible to vote did not do so.

A third factor was the collapse of the Arab vote. Less than 50 percent of Israel's Palestinian citizens went to the polling booths, compared with 85 percent in recent local elections, marking their alienation from official Israeli politics, particularly in the wake of the "Nation-State Law" and the upsurge in racist attacks against the Palestinians.

In gross violation of election law, Netanyahu sent in more than 1,000 activists armed with hidden video cameras to monitor polling stations in Palestinian communities, signalling that elections were for Jewish Israelis only. The four Palestinian parties, instead of running as a single Joint List as they did in 2015, ran on two lists, winning just 10 seats, down from 13 in the previous Knesset.

In the 1930s, with the rise of fascism in Germany, Leon Trotsky stated that the "political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat." This assessment retains all its validity today in Israel—a country whose founding was defended with the claim that it would provide a refuge from fascism and anti-Semitism. The decisive political task is to turn to the working class to build a revolutionary leadership based upon the program of socialism and internationalism as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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