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Here to stay

Benjamin Netanyahu will most likely form the next government after the Knesset elections – despite facing legal proceedings

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Israel will continue to be governed by Benjamin Netanyahu – at least according to more than half of the Israeli electorate. In a recent poll, 56 per cent say they believe Prime Minister Netanyahu will also form the next government. The 120 members of the 21st Knesset will be elected on 9 April 2019.

The cumulative polls by *#120 project* show the Blue and White alliance, lead by Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, just ahead with 31 seats, compared to 28 for Netanyahu's Likud. Yet, it will be almost impossible for Gantz to muster the 61 votes from Knesset members he requires to become prime minister. If the election results correspond to the latest polls, it's most likely that President Reuven Rivlin, following exploratory talks with all of the parliamentary groups represented in the Knesset, will again assign the task of forming a government to Benjamin Netanyahu.

In November 2018, Prime Minister Netanyahu dissolved the Knesset and called snap elections because he hoped to dodge investigations by the public prosecutor's office. In the meantime, the attorney general has recommended that the prime minister be indicted in three cases of fraud, corruption and embezzlement. On top of that, there's a public debate about irregularities relating to purchases of German submarines. Although this has put Netanyahu under considerable pressure, he manages to shrug off the legal suspicions as a trivial matter and successfully frames them as a media conspiracy by his opponents on the left.

Empty political programmes

The election campaign has been extremely personal and characterised by smears and insults. There's no sign of a mood for political change in

society. Instead, Israel appears to be deeply divided.

Tzipi Livni, former foreign minister and leader of the Kadima party, has retired from politics. Women are under-represented on almost all party lists. Only some smaller right-wing and left-wing parties are campaigning on economic and social policy as well as foreign and security policy platforms. Likud and the United Right have not published manifestos, while the electoral programmes of many other parties are extremely superficial. The Labor party has presented a comprehensive manifesto. But it hasn't managed to shift the debate during campaign towards social questions — in spite of Israel's overburdened healthcare system, neglected education system and a poverty rate of 20 per cent.

By contrast, the Blue and White alliance is pursuing a content-free campaign aimed solely at presenting itself as the better alternative to Netanyahu. Former Chiefs of the General Staff Benny Gantz, Gabi Ashkenasi and Moshe Yaalon, plus former Finance Minister Yair Lapid, head the party list and consistently highlight their experience in security policy and their neoliberal economic credentials. The fifth person on the list, Avi Nissenkorn, the former general secretary of the national trade union federation Histadrut, is kept away from the spotlight.

Netanyahu's popularity

Netanyahu, on the other hand, succeeds in marketing Israel as a successful start-up nation. The high level of poverty notwithstanding, this claim is supported by many macroeconomic indicators: Per capita GDP stands at €36,000, national debt at 60 per cent of GDP, the unemployment rate is four per cent and the monthly minimum wage no lower than €1,300.

Moreover, Netanyahu uses elaborate choreography to present himself as a successful statesman who's popular all over the world: this included his trip to Oman, the Middle East summit in Warsaw, his visit to the Wailing Wall with Brazilian President Bolsonaro and, above all else, his meeting with Donald Trump.

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Trump's presidential decree recognising Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which was also welcomed by Labor leader Avi Gabbay, has generated approval for Netanyahu. Although this recognition goes against UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 497, most Israelis see Trump's declaration as a success for Netanyahu and a compensation for the US

withdrawal from Syria. With the Golan Heights under Israeli control, Iran's influence in Syria can be curbed more easily.

The two-state solution doesn't play any role in the election campaign, but the settlement expansion does. The Blue and White alliance wants to strengthen the existing settlement blocs. There currently appears to be no desire to find a solution to the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. In successfully playing off Hamas against Fatah, Netanyahu remains in control of the conflict. Following the latest incidents, the influence of Egyptian mediators appears to have calmed the situation for the time being.

However, Israel has part-mobilised and moved large troop contingents to the south of the country. The Gaza Strip is encircled by the Israeli military. A potential provocation at the Friday protests, initiated by Hamas under the *March of Return*, motto could yet prove to be grounds for a targeted military operation by the Israeli army in the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu is under serious pressure and might feel forced to do repair work on his crumbling image as Mr Security.

A short stint for Netanyahu?

If Netanyahu is indeed asked to form a government, he will likely become a plaything of the right-wing nationalists. They will claim to have cemented Netanyahu's power in the face of his legal proceedings. In exchange, they can be expected to demand the annexation of additional areas of the West Bank. In return, Netanyahu could demand their support for the adoption of the 'French law', which would grant incumbent prime ministers immunity from prosecution. He could even form a government with parts of the Blue and White alliance, since they've made ambiguous claims about not going into coalition with Netanyahu while he still has a court judgement hanging over his head.

According to current forecasts, however, there's also one scenario in which Benny Gantz could successfully form a government: If Blue and White end up with seven or eight more seats than Likud and there's no clear support for a Netanyahu government from all of the right-wing parties, President Rivlin could ask Benny Gantz to form a government as the leader of the largest party.

Two parties that are on the right in terms of security policy – Kulanu, led by Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, and Orly Levy's Gesher party, which is not currently forecast to clear the electoral threshold – could potentially end up holding the balance of power. In this scenario, the

pressure on Netanyahu from within Likud would become so massive that he would be forced to resign: he would be the biggest loser of the election and there's no shortage of candidates eager to replace him.

Despite all this, it's likely that Benjamin Netanyahu will end up leading the next Israeli government. In light of the pending legal proceedings, most commentators believe this government would probably not last long and that Netanyahu would have to stand down in the event of his prosecution. This would likely be within 12 to 18 months of the new government being formed.



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