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Israel's Netanyahu calls early election amid corruption charges

Benyamin Netanyahu announced on Monday that he will dissolve Parliament and hold early elections on April 9, instead of November as required by law, precipitating a short election campaign by Israeli standards.

It follows the decision of the State Prosecutor's Office on December 19 to recommend charging him with bribery on two counts. This, along with similar recommendations by the Tax Authority prosecutors and the police, makes it almost inevitable that Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, who as a friend of Netanyahu has long stalled on the issue, will press charges.

The resignation of Defence Minister and Israel Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home) Party leader Avigdor Lieberman last month that left Netanyahu's fractious Likud-led coalition with a one-seat majority made an early election all but certain.

Lieberman had resigned in protest, amid furious denunciations by Netanyahu's fascistic coalition partners of the most right-wing Prime Minister in Israel's 70-year history for being too "soft" on Gaza, in the wake of Netanyahu's agreement to a ceasefire there with Hamas, the bourgeois Islamist group that controls the impoverished Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory.

While the polls have long given Netanyahu and his Likud party a clear lead over his rivals, Netanyahu sought to use what little time he had left to choose the date that would give him maximum advantage.

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Determined not to be outdone by his right-wing partners, Netanyahu sought to present himself as “Mr. Security,” dispatching the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)—amid a fanfare of publicity—to blow up some abandoned tunnels under Israel’s northern border built by Hezbollah, the militant Shi’ite group that has significant support in Lebanon, and whose existence had long been known.

Earlier this month, he authorized a series of provocative military operations following a drive-by shooting of Israeli settlers on the Palestinian West Bank that led to the death of six Palestinians and the arrest of at least 100 more in protests that erupted over Israeli brutality in Nablus, Tulkarem, Ramallah, Hebron and al-Bireh.

Netanyahu followed up this brutal crackdown with a pledge to his right-wing base to expand the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which Israel annexed illegally after seizing it during the 1967 June war. He announced his intention to legalise thousands of homes built in settlement outposts in the West Bank, previously deemed illegal under Israeli law, while going ahead with plans to redefine Jerusalem’s borders to exclude Palestinian residents.

Similarly, Israel’s water authorities announced plans to build a water pipeline across southwest Nablus that will disrupt Palestinian agricultural land and is undoubtedly part of a scheme to form a large settlement bloc separating Nablus from Ramallah in the West Bank.

After dragging his feet for months on investigations that appear, on the basis of tapes released thus far, to demonstrate open and shut cases of bribery, State Prosecutor Shai Nitzan finally recommended the prime minister be charged with bribery in two of the four cases that have been under scrutiny for years, known as 4000 and 2000.

The tapes provide a revealing insight into the nature of Israeli politics and the way that political influence and favours are bought and sold at the expense of the broader public in what Israeli politicians like to claim is “the only democracy in the Middle East.”

The more important case is Case 4000, also known as the Bezeq affair, which relates to allegations that the telecoms billionaire Shaul Elovitch gave Netanyahu favorable coverage on his *Walla* news website in exchange for regulatory favours.

Case 2000 relates to Netanyahu’s ultimately unsuccessful attempts to strike a deal for more favorable coverage with Arnon Mozes, publisher of the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, in exchange for hurting its rival freesheet, *Israel Hayom*, a pro-Netanyahu newspaper founded and financed by US casino tycoon Sheldon Adelson.

For years, Netanyahu, the ultimate cynical politician, had dismissed the allegations, claiming they were a left-wing conspiracy against him and that there was nothing to answer. But now, with the announcement that the State Prosecutor Shai Nitzan is to recommend charges, implying that the Attorney General would in turn announce his decision to prosecute sometime in the first quarter of 2019, far from resigning from office, Netanyahu has arrogantly advanced the election to the earliest possible date.

In so doing, he is banking on his longtime friend and supporter Avichai Mandelblit withholding any decision to charge him with corruption until after the election so as not to be seen as trying to influence voters. While he will have to fight the election under a cloud, this is preferable to doing so as an indicted crook and corrupt politician.

But on the other hand, should Mandelblit decide to press charges before the election, Netanyahu will refuse to resign. His right-ring allies will in all likelihood make a martyr of him and claim he is the victim of a “deep-state putsch.” Should he go on to win the election despite the indictment, Netanyahu will take it as a mandate to strengthen his own position and purge the legal apparatus in such a way as to enable him to get off scot-free.

He has form on this. His government has introduced a raft of reactionary laws that undermine freedom to criticize Israel policies, including outlawing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) and targeting left-wing NGOs, while the Nakba Law grants the finance minister the power to impose harsh fines on government-funded organizations that budget expenses for commemorating Independence Day as a day of mourning.

The recent nation-state law—which, as a basic law, has constitutional status—enshrines 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 ethno-centrist society by means of apartheid-style oppression of the Palestinian people.

Netanyahu’s Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked of the fascistic HaBayit HaYehudi (The Jewish Home) 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 (parliament) over the courts. Naftali Bennett, leader of Jewish Home and a key rival of Netanyahu, wants to free the IDF of all legal constraints, declaring that the IDF soldiers fear legal action more than Hamas, and that they cannot properly defend its citizens when their hands are tied by “legalized” thinking.

Netanyahu has forged alliances with far-right, authoritarian parties and their leaders in Europe, including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, forgiven Poland’s

government for the repudiation of Poland's role in the extermination of European Jews in the Nazi concentration camps and welcomed Italy's Interior Minister and Lega leader Matteo Salvini, who openly admires fascist leader Benito Mussolini, as well as President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines. It is no accident that every one of them has scant regard for democratic norms and freedom of the judiciary.

Anti-democratic measures in support of Israel's financial and corporate elites and their political representatives are on the agenda today precisely because the country is wracked by social tensions. It 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, including a recent nationwide walkout by social workers over poor pay and deteriorating working conditions.

Last week, as reports emerged of rising prices for basic commodities such as water, electricity and food that have followed hard on the heels of price hikes in gas and cellphone charges, insurance and property tax, hundreds of Israelis took to the streets of Tel Aviv, Israel's largest city and commercial capital, for the second Saturday in a row, alongside similar demonstrations over the weekend in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa, including Tunisia and Jordan.

Wearing "yellow vests," they were protesting the price hikes, setting the stage for a three-month campaign amid rising class struggles.