This Israeli Election Is Between the Right Wing and the Even More Right Wing

By Jonathan Cook
Global Research, April 08, 2019

Israel's election campaign, now in its last days, must be the first in which a sitting Israeli prime minister has sought to win over voters by boasting about how much he insulted a president of the United States.

One of the last campaign videos by Benjamin Netanyahu spliced together media clips of US analysts voicing disbelief back in 2011 at the Israeli prime minister's public humiliation of Barack Obama.

The ad not only described Netanyahu as "lecturing" Obama, but showed him visibly angering the US president by berating him for chasing "illusions" in his pursuit of peace talks with the Palestinians. It closed with Likud's campaign slogan: "Netanyahu. Right-wing. Strong."

Netanyahu's electioneering has rarely been subtle. But after Israel's attorney general announced during the campaign that the prime minister faced corruption indictments, Netanyahu has had every incentive to plumb new depths.

His officials have stated that his main rival, Benny Gantz, a general he once appointed as military chief of staff, is mentally unstable. One Likud video showed Gantz's head emerging from a cuckoo clock.

The character assassination has been aided by the leaking of a recording of an off-guard Gantz saying that, if he could have done so, Netanyahu would have had him killed.

Netanayhu's team also exploited, and possibly leaked, a claim that Gantz's mobile phone was hacked by Iran. "If he couldn't protect his own phone, how will he protect our country?" Netanyau has said.

Innuendo has suggested that compromising information on the phone could be used for blackmail.

Gantz, who heads the Blue & White party, hardly emerges spotless, either. He has steeped himself in dubious military glory with ads showing footage of the devastation in Gaza that he presided over, a bombing spree that killed more than 500 children. The video bragged about his sending the enclave "back to the Stone Age".

Blue & White, which includes two other high-powered generals, is the Israeli security establishment's effort to oust Netanyahu, who is seen as having squandered international goodwill with his public intransigence on peacemaking.

The generals are no less opposed to Palestinian statehood. They understand the Israeli public's mood: a recent survey shows that more than 40 per cent of Israelis favour some form of annexation of the West Bank.

Pandering to these sentiments, Netanyahu said at the weekend he would extend Israeli sovereignty to the West Bank during his next term.

Gantz has shown no inclination to stray far from this consensus. In his inaugural campaign speech, he said he would "strengthen the settlement blocs" as well as "retain control of security in the entire land of Israel", which includes the West Bank and Gaza.

He has repeatedly evaded questions about what solution he proposes for the Palestinians.

But, like most other security officials, Gantz believes it is important for Israel to court the West by giving the appearance of a willingness to negotiate.

Nonetheless, it is no simple matter to dislodge Netanyahu from power after he has won three general elections over the past decade on his security record.

He did so on previous occasions by vanquishing the country's founding Labour party, which has traditionally presented itself as centre-left. Over time, faced with an unassailable Netanyahu, Labour leaders stopped paying lip service to the Oslo peace accords they signed a quarter of a century ago.

Instead, they began to champion illegal Jewish settlements on Palestinian territory nearly as vociferously as the ruling Likud party.

This time, there are no left-leaning parties in the running. This is a straightforward slugging match between the right wing (Gantz) and the even more right wing (Netanyahu).

For most of the campaign, the two parties have been neck and neck. To form the next government, Netanyahu or Gantz must forge deals with much smaller parties in the 120-member parliament to gain a majority.

Netanyahu will need a mix of the far-right and religious-extremist factions he has previously relied on to clear the 61-seat threshold. To help, he has invited into a future coalition Jewish Power – the rebranded fascists of Kach, a party that was outlawed more than 20 years ago.

Gantz, on the other hand, is caught in an electoral trap. He will either have to out-right-wing Netanyahu to win over these same extremist parties, or secure the backing of Jewish centre-left groups and parties representing Israel's Palestinian citizens, a fifth of the population.

Bearing in mind his military career, Gantz risks alienating his core support if he suggests a readiness to enter into a deal with the Zionist left or with the country's Palestinian minority.

Netanyahu understands Gantz's bind. At the last election, in 2015, the Israeli prime minister warned on polling day that "the Arabs" – Israel's own Palestinian citizens – were "coming out in droves" to vote. He added that the Jewish left was supposedly "bussing them" to polling stations.

Throughout this campaign, Netanyahu has fanned similar flames. During a recent TV interview, he accused the Palestinian parties of supporting terrorism. He has even characterised the possibility of loose, informal support from Palestinian legislators for a Gantz-led government as "working to eliminate the state of Israel".

In a recent interview Gantz also said the Palestinian leadership in Israel "speaks out against the State of Israel, so I cannot have a political discourse with it". He has said he will sit only with parties that are "Jewish and Zionist".

Meanwhile, Yair Lapid, a former TV news host and Gantz's electoral partner, voted along with Likud to ban two Palestinian parties already in the parliament from running in the election. The decision was overturned in the courts.

None of this has been lost on Israel's Palestinian voters. They have had to sit through an allegedly ironic campaign video by the current justice minister, Ayelet Shaked, of the settler-allied New Right party, in which she sprays herself with a perfume labelled "Fascism".

They have also seen Oren Hazan, a legislator in Netanyahu's Likud party, emerging from a bubble bath, in a James Bond parody video, to shoot dead a lookalike of a leading Israeli-Palestinian politician.

In Nazareth, the largest Palestinian city in Israel, it has been hard to discern that an election is just around the corner. There have been few posters or rallies, and no excitement. According to a late poll, half of Palestinian voters in Israel intend to stay home.

In part, that reflects a protest at the Nation-State Basic Law, passed last summer, which made explicit Israel's self-definition as a Jewish state: that Palestinians can never properly be Israeli citizens and that they will always be viewed as unwelcome interlopers.

But it is also a judgment that any success by the Palestinian parties, split in this election into two acrimonious camps, will have no impact on the direction Israeli policy takes.

Whether Netanyahu or Gantz wins, more legislation will be drafted to advance institutional discrimination against the Palestinian minority, and the abusive treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories will intensify.

US President Donald Trump has done his best to give Netanyahu an electoral leg-up. That has included the recognition of Israeli claims to sovereignty over the Golan Heights and an invitation to the White House days before polling.

Last-minute surprises are still possible, but most expect Netanyahu to win outright. Even if the election is indecisive, Israeli history suggests that the most likely outcome is a national unity government between the two largest parties.

Whatever Netanyahu and Gantz claim now about being bitter enemies, the truth is that, ideologically, they have more in common than either cares to admit.

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A version of this article first appeared in the National, Abu Dhabi.

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