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Yet another Israeli election

by GWYNNE DYER

Israeli voters are indefatigable. The election on November 1st will be the fifth in just three-and-a-half years, and yet the turnout is still likely to be around 70%. That's especially remarkable because all five elections have really been about the same question: should Binyamin ?Bibi' Netanyahu go to jail, or should he be prime minister?

He is on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust, the evidence against him is strong, and his peril is real. The court system is one of the few aspects of Israeli public life that have not been politicised: former prime minister Ehud Olmert was sentenced to six years in jail (reduced to 18 months on appeal) on exactly the same charges Netanyahu now faces.

Netanyahu has benefitted from being a right-wing populist and ultra-nationalist at a time when that flavour is enjoying considerable success in politics (Trump, Bolsonaro, Orbán, Meloni, Modi, etc.). But it's still remarkable that one man can make his fate the core political issue for a country of 10 million people.

Why would he even bother, given that serving prime ministers can be indicted, put on trial, even removed from power if found guilty by the courts? Because it's a kind of insurance: a convicted prime minister still can't be removed until every last possibility for an appeal has been exhausted, which could take many years.

Moreover, a prime minister, using his majority in parliament, can try to change or abolish the laws that he has been accused of breaking. Netanyahu has not yet managed to do that, because all Israeli governments are coalitions and he couldn't persuade his political partners to go along with it. However, this time could be different.

Political attempts to bring down various coalitions led by his Likud Party began even before he was formally indicted in late 2019, and he barely squeaked a victory in each of the first three elections. After twelve consecutive years in power he lost the fourth election in 2021 by an equally narrow margin, and is currently in opposition.

But Bibi is trying hard to make it back into office next month ? and this time he might be able to form a coalition that would end his legal worries. The Religious Zionist Party (RZP) is relatively new on the scene, but it is already the country's third biggest party.

If a band of criminals managed to gain political power, you would expect them to decriminalise crime. If the RZP joins a victorious Likud-led coalition, its proposed ?Law and Justice' plan would take power from the courts and give it to the politicians instead ? and most particularly, it would annul the current law against fraud and breach of trust.

The leading figures in the RZP, Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, were once beyond the pale in Israeli politics.

Ben-Gvir famously admires Israeli terrorist Baruch Goldstein, who murdered 29 Palestinians and wounded 125 others in Hebron in 1994. Smotrich says ?Israel should be run according to Torah law? ? a theocracy like Iran, in other words. But Israeli politics has now moved far enough right to include even them: 62% of Israelis now identify as right-wing.

Bibi is not a religious fanatic himself, but Smotrich's ?legal reforms' would quash Netanyahu's indictment, so he would have no reservations about giving the RZP senior cabinet posts if the right-wing parties get enough seats in this election to form a government.

Will they? Impossible to say, really. The magic number is 61 (out of 120 seats in the Knesset), and the right-wing, pro-Netanyahu parties consistently come up with only 59 or 60 seats in the polls. The Jewish parties in the current coalition get 56, and the four parties representing Israel's Arab citizens get four seats (or possibly none at all, if they cannot unite).

Like the previous four elections, this one is likely to end up as a cliff-hanger. It may not even be the last in the series, for most Israelis are just voting the same way every time. Meanwhile, however, the real world around them is going to hell.

The three million Palestinian Arabs in the occupied West Bank are near the breaking point. The Palestinian Authority, Israel's instrument for controlling the occupied territories, has lost all authority. The PA's unelected leader, 86-year-old Mahmoud Abbas, is in poor health and has no deputy or designated successor.

The cities of Jenin and Nablus in the northern West Bank are already effectively beyond Israeli or PA control. The young and heavily armed militants of the ?Lion's Den' militia dominate the streets except when the Israeli army goes in shooting, and a third full-scale ?intifada' may be just weeks away.

Yet Israeli voters, permanently distracted by the Netanyahu melodrama, seem largely unaware of what is heading their way.