

Ever Caged, Netanyahu Calls an Early Election He's Expected to Win

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Foreign Policy

December 24, 2018

The Israeli prime minister looks to get out ahead of legal and security threats to his tenure.

Israel is holding early elections next year that will be a virtual referendum on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—his longtime leadership and his personal integrity.

Even so, Netanyahu's Likud party is the prohibitive favorite to win again, according to current polling, despite bubbling security crises to the south, east, and north; an unpredictable ally back in Washington; and the prime minister's mounting personal legal troubles. That would make a fourth consecutive term for Netanyahu, and fifth overall, almost unprecedented in Israeli political history.

Nor is there expected to be much change in policy, including U.S. President Donald Trump's long-gestating Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. Rumored to be publicized early next year, it will now likely be shelved until after the Israeli election. After nearly completing a full four-year term in this current iteration (also rare in Israeli politics) Netanyahu has previously said he simply wants to "copy-paste" his current coalition government onto the next one.

Still, there are plenty of things that could go wrong for Netanyahu between now and the snap poll set for April 9, 2019, as the premier surely knew when he and the other party leaders in his governing coalition met earlier Monday and decided unanimously to dissolve parliament. That rather subdued announcement stood in sharp contrast to the drama that unfolded just one month ago. In November—after an escalation in the Gaza Strip, the resignation of his defense minister, and ultimatums from right-wing rivals—Netanyahu pressed with all his political might to [delay early elections](#).

"We are in the midst of one of the most complex security periods, and in periods like this you don't topple a government," he said 36 days ago. "In this period you don't go to elections, it's irresponsible. We have another full year until elections [November 2019 as scheduled]."

So what changed?

The ostensible reason for calling new elections was the looming deadline for passage of an ultra-Orthodox military conscription bill that had long been negotiated inside the government. The Supreme Court struck down a previous effort as unconstitutional, giving the government an extension until mid-January to find a compromise formula. Factions within the ultra-Orthodox parties that make up part of Netanyahu's coalition threatened to oppose the measure, always controversial inside religious communities, which traditionally do not send their young men for compulsory army service.

In the end, two opposition parties withdrew their support for the bill, ensuring that it would fail and prompting the move to early elections "out of national and budgetary responsibility," as a government statement put it. Never mind the irresponsibility in going to early elections during such a sensitive security moment, as Netanyahu had said earlier. In subsequent remarks, the premier added that the campaign he was referring to, an operation launched early this month on Israel's northern border with Lebanon to find and destroy the Hezbollah militia's cross-border tunnels, was, "for the most part, now behind us."

Convenient timing, perhaps, given developments closer to home. Last week reports came out that the state prosecutor would recommend indictments—including the severe charge of bribery—against Netanyahu in three separate corruption investigations. The cases are now with Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, whose preliminary decision on whether to charge Netanyahu was itself expected in the spring.

"Obviously Netanyahu has realized that this is a serious threat, and the last thing he needs in the midst of an election campaign is the attorney general deciding to prosecute him," Reuven Hazan, a professor at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, told *Foreign Policy*. "He wants to preempt this, he wants to win, he wants to turn around to the attorney general and say, 'Before you decide to prosecute me, pay attention, the people of Israel have re-elected me for a fourth time... You can't overturn the results of a democratic election.'"

It is as yet unclear whether Mandelblit will still stick to his original schedule. There will be voices from the opposition and media clamoring for a full inventory of Netanyahu's alleged misdeeds prior to any poll, while the

premier and his allies can be counted on to cry foul—election tampering, “deep state” conspiracies, and worse—if it does come to pass.

Standing in Netanyahu’s way is an array of centrist and left-wing opposition parties. Despite polling far behind, they are putting on a brave face. As opposition leader Tzipi Livni, from the Zionist Union party, [tweeted](#) out, “From now say: not election day—but upheaval day,” raising the prospect of toppling the long-serving premier. Yet Livni’s efforts to put together a center-left bloc of parties to run on a united list against Netanyahu likely will not come to pass.

“These ‘super party’ rumors are just that—and it’s not just egos [with regard to who will be the bloc’s nominee for prime minister], but they also don’t agree ideologically,” one senior source in the opposition told FP.

The one wildcard in the proceedings, however, may be Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, a former army chief of staff and, as of now, the best hope of the anti-Netanyahu forces. Every major opposition party has courted the retired general, while rumors abound that he may ultimately form his own party and run independently—thereby assuring himself maximum leverage, and a very senior post, in the next government (no matter who wins). Yet an intriguing poll this month by Israel’s Channel 2 News [found](#) that if Gantz joined Yair Lapid’s Yesh Atid—currently polling in distant second place—then they would come within a few seats of Netanyahu’s Likud.

All of which is to say that over the next three months anything can happen. Hamas in Gaza could drag Netanyahu into a war he sorely doesn’t want. The West Bank could devolve into further violence, already heightened in the last few weeks after a series of deadly terrorist attacks. And Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran in Syria may be emboldened after the Trump administration’s announced withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Levant.

Netanyahu is the clear favorite, with the upcoming election all about him. He exudes complete confidence in public, as befitting a man who is not only Israel’s prime minister, but also at present defense minister and foreign minister too.

L’etat, c’est moi, perhaps, but in an election he will merely be one candidate among many appealing for the vote. As the opposition source put it, “It’s amazing to me that after Trump and Brexit, everyone is sure 100 percent that he will win again.”

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