

Polls show Netanyahu poised to win Israeli election with far-right alliance

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A supporter of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu holds up an election banner as he campaigns at Mahane Yehuda market, a day before the general election in Jerusalem [Ammar Awad/Reuters]

Tel Aviv, November 2 (RHC)-- Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared well placed to return to power after exit polls following Tuesday's election showed his right-wing bloc heading for a narrow majority, lifted by a strong showing from his far-right allies.

Israel's longest-serving premier, on trial for corruption charges that he denies, was poised to take 61-62 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, according to Israeli television exit polls. Caretaker Prime Minister Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid party was on track for its expected second-place finish, with projections giving it between 22 and 24 seats.

The early exit polls may differ from the final result of the election, which is not expected until later in the week. But the results pointed to a stronger-than-expected showing by the right. "It looks like Bibi [Netanyahu] is back after 16 months in opposition, plotting his return," Al Jazeera's Bernard Smith reported from West Jerusalem. "Benjamin Netanyahu seems to have pulled off his political resurrection."

Israel's fifth election in less than four years exasperated many Israeli voters. The campaign was shaken up by right-wing firebrand Itamar Ben-Gvir and his ultra-nationalist Religious Zionism bloc, now poised to be the third-largest party with 15 seats in parliament.

Security on the streets and surging prices topped the list of voter concerns in a campaign triggered by defections from Lapid's unlikely ruling coalition of right-wing, liberal and Palestinian parties. But policy issues have been overshadowed by the outsized personality of Netanyahu, whose legal battles have fed the stalemate blocking Israel's political system since he was indicted on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in 2019.

Netanyahu, 73, has been counting on support from Ben-Gvir and fellow far-right leader Bezalel Smotrich. The prospect of Ben-Gvir, a former member of Kach, a group on Israeli and United States "terrorist" watchlists, joining a coalition risks alarming allies including Washington.

Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who last week visited US President Joe Biden at the White House and stressed Israel's strong ties to the US, on Monday appealed to American Jewish leaders to respect the election results. "The results may or may not be to your liking, but the vote of the Israeli people should be respected," Herzog said during an address to the Jewish Federations of North America, Israeli media reported, in an apparent reference to the rise of far-right parties.

The Israeli election campaign, which opened weeks after a brief conflict with the Islamic Jihad group in Gaza in August, also has unrolled against a backdrop of increasing violence in the occupied West Bank, with near-daily Israeli army raids.

Marwan Bishara, Al Jazeera's senior political analyst, said a Netanyahu-led coalition government will "make sure that there will be no peace process moving forward at all with the Palestinians." "And there will be no two-state solution and there will be no withdrawal from occupied territories," Bishara said.

He added that many right-wing Israeli politicians previously served in past Netanyahu governments. "So what we have today is this indicted prime minister has basically [given] birth to all these right-wing, populist parties that are now governing in Israel," said Bishara.

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