

'Racist and reprehensible': Jewish Power set to enter Israel's parliament

Early results suggest far-right alliance will take more seats than predicted



Bezael Smotrich, centre left, the head of the Religious Zionist party, walks with Itamar Ben-Gvir, the head of Israel's Jewish Power party, in Jerusalem.

Oliver Holmes *in Tel Aviv*

Wed 24 Mar 2021

After another muddled election result, Benjamin Netanyahu is betting on a partnership with a group so extreme that even the prime minister's usually unflinching backers from the pro-Israel US lobby cannot stomach it.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac) has called Jewish Power, a party of ultranationalist extremists, "racist and reprehensible". But on Wednesday, although votes are still being counted and success is by no means guaranteed, those same people are being courted by Israel's longest-serving leader to join an assortment of other parties.

What is clear from early results is that the Religious Zionist party, an alliance of which Jewish Power is a part, has exceeded expectations and will take more seats than predicted. The alliance's leader, Bezael Smotrich, once suggested segregated wards in hospitals so Jewish women would not have to give birth next to Palestinians.

An overwhelmingly male crowd at the group's election party erupted into cheers overnight as exit polls showed the mixture of anti-LGBT and hardline pro-settlement politicians had garnered significant support. Jewish Power's leader, Itamar Ben-Gvir,

who is set to become a lawmaker for the first time, was hoisted on to the stage by supporters.

“I have a dream,” he told them. “I have a dream that [Israeli] soldiers will live in a nation that has their backs ... I have a dream that a rightwing government will strengthen the Jewish identity of the country.”

An attorney who has defended Israeli settlers implicated in violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, Ben-Gvir was convicted in 2007 of inciting racism after holding signs at a protest reading “Expel the Arab enemy”.

Until last year he kept a photo in his living room of Baruch Goldstein, an American-Israeli settler who in 1994 shot dead 29 Palestinians in Hebron as they held morning prayers.

His party, Jewish Power, is formed of ideological successors to Meir Kahane, a US-born rabbi who served one term in Israel’s parliament in 1984 before his Kach party was banned. Kahane advocated for a Jewish theocracy, the expulsion of Palestinians and a ban on marriage between Jews and Arabs.

Years earlier, having set up the militant Jewish Defense League, he was imprisoned for bomb-making in the US. Kahane was assassinated in 1990 by an Egyptian-born American gunman. The FBI regards the Jewish Defense League as a rightwing terrorist group after two members attempted to bomb a California mosque.

Ben-Gvir has claimed that Jewish Power is “not a continuation” of Kahane’s ideology but has said he considered the man “a holy saint who fought wars for the people of Israel and was killed sanctifying God’s name”.

Last month Netanyahu signed an agreement with Religious Zionism, of which Jewish Power is a part, promising positions in government in exchange for support. The 71-year-old leader said Ben-Gvir would be in his broad coalition but was “not fit” to be a cabinet member. However, with preliminary results showing very slim margins, Netanyahu is vulnerable to pressure.

Nahum Barnea, a commentator for the country’s top-selling newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth, wrote on Wednesday that the rise of Religious Zionism “isn’t just a blow to morale, it’s an ideological catastrophe.”

He said Netanyahu’s ruling Likud party was now “a hostage in the hands of an anti-democratic, racist, homophobic, terrorism-sponsoring group of people.”