



Israel Heads for Unprecedented Third Election In A Year

Israel will hold an unprecedented third national election in less than a year, following the failure of political leaders to break the ongoing deadlock.

The Knesset had until midnight Wednesday to agree on a politician who could command the support of 61 out of the 120 members of Israel's parliament. When no one was able to garner the minimum backing, an election in March 2020 was automatically triggered.



The move means Benjamin Netanyahu remains the country's Prime Minister, even though he has presided over a transition government for nearly a year and failed to assemble a functioning coalition after elections in April and September.

This time, Netanyahu will conduct his campaign while facing criminal indictment on charges of bribery and fraud and breach of trust in three separate criminal investigations. The 70-year-old Israeli leader also faces a serious challenge within his own Likud party -- a leadership contest is tentatively scheduled for December 26th.

If he remains the head of the party he has led for more than a decade, Netanyahu will face off in March against his now familiar foe, former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, whose Blue and White party emerged from September's elections with the most seats. Like Netanyahu, Gantz was also unable to form a government.



In a blame game that began almost immediately after the last elections, Netanyahu pinned the failure to form a government on Gantz's party, accusing it of a "barrage of spins." In a video statement on social media Wednesday evening, Netanyahu said, "[Blue and White wants] to hide the fact that they did everything in order to avoid forming a broad unity government that would have annexed the Jordan Valley," referring to the fact that Gantz refused to join forces and serve under him.

Blue and White fired back, telling Netanyahu to "save some of the lies for the campaign." In the Knesset, Gantz blamed Netanyahu for the political stalemate, saying, "It now seems like we will be going into a third election cycle because of Netanyahu's attempt to obtain immunity."

Like any member of Knesset facing criminal charges, Netanyahu is allowed to ask for parliamentary immunity. Gantz has made immunity an early campaign issue, accusing Netanyahu of taking the country back to elections as he seeks the numbers to grant him protection from prosecution.

Meanwhile, former Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman lashed out at both politicians, accusing them of refusing to compromise for the sake of the country.

"Neither Likud nor Blue and White wanted a unity government," Liberman said at a party meeting in the Knesset Wednesday. His eight-seat Yisrael Beiteinu party had refused to back either Netanyahu or Gantz and left both short of a coalition.

But Liberman saved his most scathing criticism for Netanyahu, under whom he once served in the Prime Minister's office. Accusing Netanyahu of spreading "slander, distortions, and vicious narratives" against him, Liberman said, "The difference between us, I have values, while you have only interests. My top value is friendship, something that is completely foreign to you."

The political deadlock has hamstrung the country of nine million, according to Israel Democracy Institute President Yohanan Plesner.

"Starting in January 2020, there is no budget," Plesner said in a conference call Wednesday afternoon. "That means that extensive areas of government and budgeting are going to be paralyzed. When it comes to transportation, infrastructure investment, approving the military's next 5-year plan and so on, all of these processes will be suspended with serious costs both to the national interests and to individual citizens." But the impasse has not much lowered Israelis' trust in the political system, Plesner said -- only because it was so low already. "The public's trust in political institutions such as parties, Knesset, government, politicians themselves was rather low and remained low."

After his chief rival, Benny Gantz of the centrist Blue and White party, failed to form a government by the Wednesday deadline, that task shifted to Parliament. If no lawmaker is successful in assembling a 61-seat majority over the next three weeks, a third round of elections will be called.

While Mr. Netanyahu has maintained strong support from his political base so far, polls have shown that a formal indictment would change many minds, including among many right-wing voters.

"We've seen consistently that a big majority of the public, about two-thirds, do not think a prime minister can serve and at the same time try to clear his name in court," said Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute.



*Edited by Idan Sharon, Adat Shalom's Shaliach. Idan.Sharon@adatshalom.net
The Congregational Shlichim Program is a partnership between
the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and local synagogues.*



The Jewish Federation
OF GREATER WASHINGTON