

Both Netanyahu, Rival Gantz Claim Israeli Election Win

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was on course to securing a record fifth term with another right-wing coalition, Israeli TV exit polls indicated after voting ended on Tuesday, as both he and his principal rival claimed victory.

Netanyahu, in power consecutively since 2009, is fighting for his political survival. He faces possible indictment in three corruption cases, in which the right-wing Likud party leader has denied any wrongdoing.

If he wins, Netanyahu, 69, will become the longest-serving prime minister in Israel's 71-year history this summer.

Exit polls on two of Israel's three main TV channels showed that main challenger Benny Gantz's Blue and White Party won slightly more seats than Likud in the 120-member parliament, while a third survey forecast a tie.

Though neither party captured a ruling majority in the Knesset, according to the exit polls, the surveys put Netanyahu in a stronger position to form a coalition government with the help of right-wing factions.

Some political analysts, however, cautioned it was too early to determine the outcome, with many hours to go before a final tally is in.

Channel 13 forecast Netanyahu could piece together a ruling bloc controlling 66 seats compared with 54 for a Blue and White-led coalition of center-left and left-wing parties.

Public TV Kan put the ratio at 64 to 56 in Likud's favor, while Channel 12 predicted a tie, at 60 seats each.

"The rightist bloc led by Likud has won a clear victory,"

Netanyahu said in a statement. "I will begin forming a right-wing government with our natural partner this very night."

A spokesman for Gantz's party declared: "We won. The Israeli public has had their say."

Ofer Zalzburg, senior analyst with the International Crisis Group, said Likud and Blue and White would have to learn the fate of smaller parties to know whether they had garnered enough support for a coalition.

"Netanyahu is more likely to establish another right-wing government, but we will have to wait and see," he said.

During the campaign, the rival parties accused each other of corruption, fostering bigotry and being soft on security.

Netanyahu highlighted his close relationship with U.S. President Donald Trump, who delighted Israelis and angered Palestinians by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and moving the American Embassy to the holy city last May.

In a rare turn during the race towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Netanyahu further alarmed Palestinians by promising to annex Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank if re-elected. Palestinians seek a state there and in the Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Commenting on the Israeli election, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told reporters in the West Bank: "We hope they choose the just path, in the right direction, to reach out for peace."

Israeli-Palestinian peace talks collapsed in 2014.

COALITION-BUILDING

A close result in the election would put smaller parties in a powerful position, even turning marginal political figures

into kingmakers.

Once the votes are tallied, President Reuven Rivlin will ask parties that have won parliamentary seats who they support for prime minister. He will then pick a party leader to try to form a coalition, giving the candidate 28 days to do so, with a two-week extension if needed.

One factor may be the turnout of voters from Israel's 21 percent Arab minority. Many were angered by Israel's nation-state law, passed in 2018, which declared that only Jews have the right of self-determination in the country. Netanyahu supported the legislation.

Netanyahu's party sent monitors equipped with body cameras to a number of polling stations with Arab constituents on election day. Arab politicians condemned the move as voter intimidation.

Voting in Tel Aviv, businessman Dedi Cohen, 44, said he supported Gantz. "I considered voting for Bibi (Netanyahu). Life isn't bad: I've been around the world and seen that Israel is a good place in terms of the economy and security.

"But still, a change is in order. After 13 years, it's time for some ventilation up top," added Cohen.

Backing Netanyahu, Avi Gur, 65, a lecturer at Ariel University in a settlement in the West Bank, said he was "very excited."

"I hope that rightism will win," he said.

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