

Israeli President Chooses Netanyahu to Form New Government

On Wednesday, Israel's President Reuven Rivlin tapped incumbent Benjamin Netanyahu to take the first crack at assembling a majority coalition in the Knesset.

The move came after Rivlin summoned the leaders of the country's two largest parties to his residence for a second time in a stepped-up effort to break the post-election political deadlock paralyzing the nation.

Rivlin is responsible for choosing the candidate he believes has the best chance of forming a coalition government. Neither Netanyahu nor his challenger Benny Gantz won the required support of a parliamentary majority in last week's election.

Rivlin this week mediated a first meeting between the two men in hopes of forging a unity deal between Netanyahu's Likud party and Gantz's Blue and White. They returned to Rivlin's official residence on Wednesday night for another round of talks.

The talks have bogged down due to disagreements over who should lead the unity government. Gantz previously said he will not be part of a government headed by Netanyahu because of the prime minister's legal problems.

After unity talks failed, Rivlin gave Netanyahu the difficult task of cobbling together a coalition. Israeli media previously speculated that Netanyahu would be given the first opportunity, a prediction that turned out to be correct.

According to final official results announced Wednesday, Blue and White finished first with 33 seats in the 120-seat

Parliament, just ahead of Likud's 32 seats. Even with the support of smaller allies, both parties are short of the required 61-seat majority.

A total of 55 lawmakers have recommended that Netanyahu lead the next government, while 54 have lined up behind Gantz. The key power broker is Avigdor Lieberman, whose Yisrael Beiteinu party controls eight seats. Lieberman refused to endorse either candidate and is pushing for a unity government.

Netanyahu faces an uphill struggle putting together a coalition. Netanyahu's opponents previously said they will not join him, and the secular Lieberman says he will not be part of a government that includes Netanyahu's religious allies.

Looming over the process is the corruption investigation against Netanyahu. Israel's attorney general has recommended charging Netanyahu with bribery, fraud and breach of trust in a series of scandals.

Netanyahu, who denies any wrongdoing, is to appear at a hearing with the attorney general next week, after which a final decision on charges is expected.

Under Israeli law, the president's first choice is given up to six weeks to form a coalition. If he fails, he can choose an alternative candidate to try. After that, a majority of Parliament could offer a third name to be prime minister. And if that fails, Israel would be forced into holding its third election in less than a year. {eo}

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