



The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

Israel Holds Its Third Election in Less than a Year

Israel held its third election in less than a year on Monday, after the previous two failed to yield conclusive results. The two major parties contesting the election are the conservative Likud, led by incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the centrist Blue and White, led by former military commander Benny Gantz. Despite fears of voter fatigue and the risk of the coronavirus, early results showed the highest voter turnout in an Israeli election since 2015. Netanyahu's Likud party appears to have beaten Blue and White by a small margin, and the former's right-wing bloc is projected to win 58 of the 120 seats in parliament, meaning that they need an additional 3 seats in order to form a 61-seat majority in the Knesset. If Netanyahu is tasked with the first opportunity to form a coalition, he will have to do so while also facing his impending criminal corruption trial on March 17th, which leaves the Israeli political climate in a state of major uncertainty. In an additional note, the Joint List – a political alliance of the main Arab-majority parties in Israel – won 15 seats in the Knesset, marking this election as their strongest-ever showing.

A fundamental aspect of both parties' campaigns was the impending trial facing Prime Minister Netanyahu. Netanyahu is the first sitting Prime Minister in Israeli history to be indicted, and he awaits a trial on fraud and bribery charges in two weeks' time. Netanyahu has long asserted that the charges against him are politically motivated and has previously sought immunity from them. He adopted a siege mentality during the campaign, and painted a picture of the political establishment being his enemy. Conversely, Benny Gantz argued that it would be impossible for a prime minister to adequately run the country while also standing trial. Gantz said that Netanyahu continuing as prime minister would begin Israel's descent from democracy to autocracy.

In addition to Netanyahu's impending trial, President Trump's "Deal of the Century" played a role in the campaign. Both Netanyahu and Gantz have endorsed the plan, but Gantz said he would only proceed with the plan if it had broad international support, and he had negotiated a settlement independently with Palestinian leaders. Benny Gantz has also entered into a coalition with Arab lawmakers in the Joint List, the Knesset's largest Arab bloc, as part of a larger effort to win over Arab voters. The Joint List won 15 seats in the Knesset, marking this election as their strongest ever. It is thought that the Trump Peace Plan galvanized the Arab community to vote, which is evidenced by the Joint List's new standing as the third-largest body in the Knesset.

With either Likud or Blue and White needing a 61-seat majority to form a government, maverick politician Avigdor Lieberman could play the role of kingmaker. Lieberman was once a close ally of Benjamin Netanyahu, but split with him after Israel's April 2019 elections to form Yisrael Beiteinu, a right-wing secular nationalist party. Lieberman campaigned on using his influence to ensure Israel didn't have yet another vote by throwing his support behind whichever party was in the strongest position. It appears as though Likud has the upper-hand, but if Benny Gantz is able to form a coalition with other parties to rival Netanyahu's position, Lieberman could have a difficult decision to make.