Israel Holds Its 4th National Election in the Span of 2 Years with Continued Political Deadlock Expected

Israel's fourth election in two years appears to have ended in stalemate, as no party won enough seats to claim a majority. Embattled and criminally-indicted incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party and its allies won the most parliamentary seats in Israel's Knesset, but remain short of the needed 61 for an outright majority. Israel's election was triggered by the dissolution of a coalition government involving Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, which fell apart after Netanyahu reneged on a promise to hand power to Gantz. Despite Likud's success compared to any other single political party at the ballot box, the prospects for breaking the gridlock and forming a new coalition government are slim. If neither Netanyahu nor his opponents in the anti-Netanyahu bloc are able to do so, Israel will be headed towards an unprecedented fifth consecutive election in the coming months.

Despite sabotaging his former coalition government and being under criminal investigation for fraud and bribery, Benjamin Netanyahu remains the king-maker in Israeli politics. Netanyahu's right-wing nationalist Likud Party is still staunchly popular in Israel, and it won the most seats of any individual party in the most recent elections. While campaigning, Netanyahu tried to extol his successes as prime minister, including the recent Arab-Israeli "peace" deals and Israel's focus on vaccinating its citizens against COVID-19. However, experts have noted that the election was less about issues, and more a referendum on Netanyahu. The incumbent is largely unpopular and a bloc of anti-Netanyahu parties did well, however the outcome was not decisive enough for either side and therefore political deadlock looks set to continue.

Although Likud won the most seats in the Knesset, Benjamin Netanyahu didn't win enough support to automatically propel him to another term as prime minister. A coalition government will need to be formed, and to do this, Likud will need to make concessions to other parties. Netanyahu has traditionally tried to work with ideologically similar right-wing parties, although he broke from this tradition in the previous coalition government when he worked with the center-left Blue and White. One party that Likud could seek to bring into a coalition is the United Arab List. The leader of the United Arab List, Mansour Abbas, has worked with Netanyahu in the past, and reports suggest he could join a coalition government with Likud if certain assurances were made. However, the entrance of an Arab party into Likud's coalition would likely alienate some members, most notably those on the far-right who are strongly anti-Arab.

On the other side, several parties joined forces to create an anti-Netanyahu bloc, including former coalition member Benny Gantz and the Blue and White Party. However, in-fighting remains a problem due to competing interests among the center-left even though they are united in their opposition to Netanyahu. If neither group is able to form a coalition government then Israel will undergo a fifth election, a prospect that many political figures and citizens on both sides are weary of. Voter turnout has been steadily slipping through the repeated elections, with the 69% turnout in this election being the lowest recorded in Israel.