

Is Benjamin Netanyahu's Reign Finally Coming to an End?

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The Israeli prime minister's failure to form a government suggests he will not prevail this time, but a decisive outcome will likely require yet another round at the polls.

In the small hours of election night in Israel last month, a haggard looking Benjamin Netanyahu strode to the stage to address his Likud party supporters and TV viewers watching at home. He had just suffered a resounding reversal at the polls, the country's second election in five months, with Likud and its right-wing allies losing seats. Just based on the parliamentary math, a realistic route didn't exist for him to cobble together a governing coalition and serve another term as prime minister—a position he's held for more than a decade.

Yet the crowd was unbowed. "Bibi, King of Israel, lives, lives and endures," it chanted, using Mr. Netanyahu's omnipresent nickname. He rejected any talk of defeat and vowed that he would still lead the country in the future.

But fast forward to this past week, and the election results of that night have been ratified. Mr. Netanyahu on Monday admitted failure and returned the mandate to form a government back to the President; his chief rival, Benny Gantz, head of the centrist Blue and White party, will now have a month to try his luck.

This was all expected but it's no less dramatic. It marks the first time since 2008 that someone other than Mr. Netanyahu has even been given the opportunity to form a government. It also marked a second consecutive failure by Mr. Netanyahu to retain power, going back to April's initial general election (and the reason he triggered a second consecutive vote). Compounded with his looming criminal indictments on various corruption charges, Mr. Netanyahu is clearly at his lowest ebb.

It's all a major comedown for a leader who has, in the later stages of his reign, given new meaning to the term *l'état c'est moi*. In addition to the premiership, Mr. Netanyahu has been defence minister, and holds three other ministry positions as well. The cabinet has been a rubber stamp for decisions he concludes beforehand with his security chiefs.

In the recent election campaign, his fellow Likud officials were mere background props, if they appeared at all. Giant billboards across the country showed his visage, alongside Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi. “A different league,” the tagline went, referring to Mr. Netanyahu’s status as a global statesman.

Those who cover Mr. Netanyahu are well versed in a PowerPoint presentation he repeatedly gives, highlighting the gains Israel has made in the past decade—diplomatically, economically, militarily. “It’s the rise of the Jewish state as a world power,” he expounds, with some reason. Yet the time frame chosen, naturally corresponding to his tenure, makes it seem like the country was nothing but a sandy backwater before he deigned to reassume power (he served as prime minister for three years in the 1990s as well).

Mr. Netanyahu has now dragged this purported world power into political chaos as he wages a desperate rear-guard action to maintain the premiership. Or, at the very least, to deny it from Mr. Gantz. While Mr. Netanyahu’s path to forming a government was non-existent, Mr. Gantz’s options are likely only marginally better.

A retired military chief who entered politics less than a year ago, Mr. Gantz is a neophyte who nevertheless built Blue and White with one goal in mind: unseating Mr. Netanyahu. The party brought together two other former military chiefs and a popular centrist politician in an alliance that would be attractive to both left- and right-wing voters. “Israel above all else” was their campaign slogan, alluding to Mr. Netanyahu’s monarchical governing style, corruption charges and proclivity to fan the flames of division inside the country.

And it somehow worked. In the recent election, Blue and White beat Likud by one seat. But Mr. Gantz still needs several other parties to form a governing coalition. Since election night, Mr. Netanyahu has successfully shored up support within Likud as well as his other right-wing and ultra-Orthodox allies. Through repeated, forced oaths of fealty he remains, for now, this political bloc’s sole candidate for prime minister—thereby denying Mr. Gantz a majority.

Mr. Gantz in theory does have the option of forming a minority government with the support of the Arab-Israeli political parties, but the chances of it coming to pass are remote: No Israeli government has been seated with a minority of parliament, let alone with the votes of Arab factions deemed by many Jewish-Israelis—including some in Blue and White—as anathema. Then again, no Israeli election cycle has ever seen two repeat ballots, let alone a potential third if Mr. Gantz, too, fails to form a government.

And so the political stalemate continues. Both Likud and Blue and White are now engaged in a high-stakes game of chicken to see who blinks first.

Will Blue and White relent on its core promise to its voters—“Just Not Bibi”—and allow Mr. Netanyahu to continue on as prime minister in a rotating premiership arrangement with Mr. Gantz? Or will Likud and its right-wing allies finally jettison Mr. Netanyahu, paving the way for some kind of grand coalition with Blue and White?

All sides say they want national unity. All sides say they want to avoid the calamity of a third election. Yet, absent some kind of compromise, or, alternatively, a quick shift in Mr. Netanyahu’s legal situation or an unforeseen military escalation, Israel seems to be barreling once more toward the ballot box.

Mr. Netanyahu remains the obstacle, obstinate and all-consuming, holding an entire country hostage to his own political fortunes. Israel’s longest-serving prime minister likely knows that another vote, under current conditions, is a terrible option—except for all the others available to him. King Bibi is dead, yet for now he still endures.

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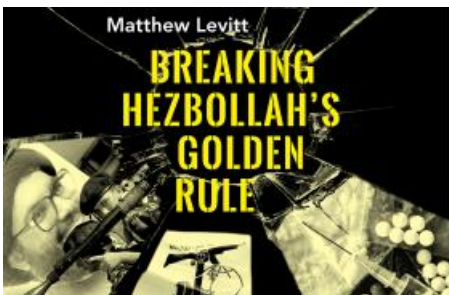
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