

The Premier Who Cried Gevalt: Why Netanyahu Lost His Majority

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Whether due to institutional concerns, failed alarmist tactics, or turnout issues, Netanyahu's seat tally shrank between rounds one and two, and time is now on Benny Gantz's side.

Israel's September 17 election ended with no bloc winning the 61 seats needed for a majority in the 120-seat parliament. The current tally is 57 seats for the center-left bloc (led by the Blue and White Party with 33), and 55 seats for the right-wing bloc (led by the Likud Party with 31). As a result, the coalition formation process could take weeks, and a power-sharing arrangement seems the most likely (though not certain) outcome. The era of exclusive control by the country's longest-serving premier, Binyamin Netanyahu, seems to be over, but it is too soon to say whether Blue-White leader Benny Gantz will succeed him.

WHY DID NETANYAHU LOSE?

The results indicate that Netanyahu's party lost eight seats between the April election and this week's do-over vote, if one factors in the addition of Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon's party. According to Israel's Channel 13, the Likud leader blamed the outcome on outlying cities, which are normally strongholds for his party but did not turn out the way they have in past elections. He said the same about West Bank settlements. A look at voting patterns in key cities does show a fractional but cumulative drop for Likud.

Netanyahu was already aware of this turnout problem on election day, when he took to Facebook Live and frenetically implored viewers to vote. He even went to the main Jerusalem bus station with a megaphone in hand to make his pitch, using his patented "Gevalt" (alarm) rhetoric to warn people that sundry disasters would befall Israel if he lost. Yet like the boy who cried wolf, he had used this tactic too many times in the past, and voters ignored his pleas.

Although more data is needed to explain the apparent complacency of core Likud supporters on the right (Mizrachi voters) and settlers, their attitude may stem from a sense that his main rival would not represent a radical shift for Israel. In other words, Netanyahu seemed to frame the election as an ideological fight, but the public did not see Gantz, a former military chief of staff, as the Israeli equivalent of British leftist Jeremy Corbyn.

Netanyahu also seemed to lose some moderate right-wing voters. It was telling that iconic leader Menachem Begin's son, Benny, announced before the election that he would not vote for Netanyahu. Like his father, Benny is associated with the rule of law, and he shares the widespread concern that Netanyahu has abandoned his cautious approach and may be leading a proud democracy to veer dangerously off course.

Indeed, Netanyahu has often seemed willing to erode institutional norms in order to survive politically and legally. Many Israelis did not like it when his aides pledged to use parliament as a vehicle to immunize him from prosecution; when he denigrated the law enforcement agencies investigating his corruption charges; when he alleged without a shred of evidence that the elections were rigged; or when he moved toward another Gaza incursion without following proper cabinet procedures, spurring Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit to intervene last week. Many were also taken aback when he pushed for emergency legislation to install cameras at voting stations in Arab-majority districts (parliament voted the measure down, and the tactic wound up boomeranging when Arab turnout increased). In short, public support for Israel's democratic institutions seemed to outweigh support for Netanyahu.

TWO TICKING CLOCKS

After the election, both Netanyahu and Gantz said they favor a power-sharing arrangement via a national unity government. This option was also a campaign centerpiece for Avigdor Liberman, the former defense minister whose party Yisrael Beiteinu won eight seats, giving it the balance of power between Gantz and Netanyahu's factions. Liberman has since reiterated that a unity government is the only way forward, and if one fails to materialize, he will be perfectly positioned to decide who is to blame for the stalemate, and who deserves his seats. Yet even his kingmaker role is subject to complications given the way the votes panned out. For example, if he were to swing center-left, he and Gantz would still need an ultraorthodox party to join them in order to reach the coveted 61 seats—a tricky proposition because such parties lean right. And wooing Arab parties is not an option because they all refuse to join parliamentary coalitions, fearing they might be responsible for approving

military operations against fellow Arabs.

Whatever the case, there is precedent for a unity government. The quintessential example occurred in 1984-1988, when President Chaim Herzog urged the two main parties to break their electoral stalemate and come together for the country's sake. They agreed, allowing their party leaders to rotate the post of prime minister at the term's halfway point.

Yet forming such a government today may be difficult because Gantz and Netanyahu diverge on its makeup. Before the election, Netanyahu favored a right-wing government that could better immunize him from prosecution, while Gantz called for a unity government that excluded Netanyahu until his legal cloud lifted. Gantz's strong showing at the polls will likely stiffen his resolve to keep Netanyahu out.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu has been arguing that his right-wing bloc would provide a more cohesive core for a unity government. Yet this seems farfetched because Blue-White will likely call for at least some constraints on settlements, which the settler party in Netanyahu's bloc would presumably oppose. Another potential scenario is holding a third round of elections, which Netanyahu's aides say they would not rule out. Yet President Reuven Rivlin's office has already called this option unthinkable, and the Likud is well aware that Netanyahu stands little chance of faring any better in another vote after dropping seats between rounds one and two.

Given all these dynamics, Gantz likely realizes that time is on his side. Rivlin will start consultations in the next few days with all factions to determine who gets the first chance to assemble a government: Gantz or Netanyahu. Whoever is chosen will then have a month to fulfill that task, with a possible two-week extension if necessary.

A second clock is also working in Gantz's favor. On October 2, Netanyahu will face his long-awaited hearing on three corruption charges, and Mandelblit is expected to issue indictments shortly thereafter. This hearing will draw major public attention, and since the coalition formation negotiations are unlikely to conclude by then, Gantz has probably calculated that more Israelis will begin to question whether an indicted politician should be allowed to head a government.

Indictments would also affect any rotation agreement. In that scenario, Netanyahu would want to be premier first and then continue serving on the cabinet in another role. By law, however, only a prime minister is allowed to serve while under indictment, not a regular minister. Gantz would likely reject this demand anyway, since his party and bloc won more seats.

Gantz's faction also likely believes these ticking clocks will stir another Likud candidate to step forward as the new party leader. Yet Netanyahu is showing no signs of quitting voluntarily, and the Likud has a track record of exceptional loyalty to its leaders, choosing only four of them since 1948. This DNA generally makes party members avoid any whiff of pushing out Netanyahu; for example, during recent conversations with the author, four Likud cabinet ministers said it would be political suicide to step forward and make that suggestion. Moreover, Netanyahu has studiously avoided cultivating a successor, so there is no natural substitute on hand.

TRUMP AND ISRAEL

After the election, President Trump made a striking move by publicly distancing himself from Netanyahu, the candidate he had supported so vigorously. Yet Trump is renowned for disliking people who lose. When asked if he had spoken with Netanyahu after the vote, he said he had not, and pointedly noted that the U.S. relationship is "with Israel." This statement sharply undercuts Netanyahu, who marketed his close ties with the U.S. president as a major selling point throughout the campaign.

The repercussions of this shift stretch beyond personal camaraderie. In his first speech after the election, Netanyahu stated that the White House is about to put forward its long-awaited Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. Presumably, he hopes Gantz will let him into a unity government in the name of peace, and even share power. Yet issuing the plan may instead embolden Gantz to believe he should be the one to handle issues of war and peace, not Netanyahu. In the end, the Trump administration may keep delaying the plan until it has a better sense of Israeli political dynamics, particularly in light of more-pressing issues unfolding in the Persian Gulf.

Beyond the Trump administration's actions, the likelihood of a broad-based national unity government would boost bipartisan U.S. support for Israel. Some Democrats have had bruised feelings toward the Israeli government for some time, due in no small part to Netanyahu's close relationship with Trump, the empowerment of settler and ultraorthodox factions in recent years, and Netanyahu's divisive speech to Congress in 2015. Even so, Netanyahu is still hoping his savvy will carry him up this steep political hill and enable him to continue his political career.

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