

'Magician' Netanyahu Headed for Fifth Term as Israel's Leader

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- ▶ PM's bloc set for 65 seats with 98 percent of votes tallied
 - ▶ Netanyahu fought bruising campaign against ex-military chief
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Benjamin Netanyahu, right, waves as wife Sara Netanyahu reacts at the Likud party headquarters in Tel Aviv, on April 10. *Photographer: Kobi Wolf/Bloomberg*

People don't call Benjamin Netanyahu "the magician" for nothing.

The attorney general had already served notice that he plans to indict the Israeli prime minister on multiple counts of bribery and fraud. A popular former military chief with a reputation for integrity had convinced many in Israel that their leader had to go.

But the scandals weren't enough to sink Netanyahu's bid to become Israel's longest-serving prime minister. His nationalist base rallied to his aid, cushioning him against likely charges,

and if current trends hold, he'll have led Likud to one of its best showings ever in Tuesday's closely-fought elections. Israel's shekel was virtually unchanged by midday.

Retired general Benny Gantz has yet to concede defeat, but with 98 percent of votes counted, Netanyahu's alliance with right-wing and religious parties is on track to secure 65 seats in the 120-seat parliament, or Knesset, giving him a clear path to form the next government.

"People say: I don't care if he is corrupt or not, I don't care if he took a few cigars or presents, the main thing is that from my point of view, the economy is growing and there is security," said Erez Cohen, a senior lecturer at Ariel University.

The election result could ripple across a volatile region. Peacemaking with the Palestinians has stalled under Netanyahu's watch; instead he opted to improve Israel's ties with Gulf Arab states by leveraging a shared distrust of Iran. A U.S. peace plan, which the Trump administration says will present new solutions to break the impasse, is expected to be unveiled shortly after the election.

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Just ahead of polling, Netanyahu pitched for right-wing voters who might be tempted to back other nationalist factions, suggesting he could annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank that Palestinians want for the heartland of a future state.

Hanan Ashrawi, a veteran official from the Palestine Liberation Organization, said Israelis had chosen racism and permanent conflict. "They have chosen an overwhelmingly right-wing, xenophobic and anti-Palestinian parliament to represent them," she said. "Israelis chose to entrench and expand apartheid."

The final tally is unlikely to be announced before Thursday, as about 200,000 votes cast by Israeli soldiers could take longer to filter through and produce some last-minute surprises.

After declaring victory early in the night, Gantz's Blue and White party watched as the numbers turned against them in a knife-edge vote. By morning, Gantz admitted that the odds were not in his favor, but issued a statement to supporters saying the movement was only at the beginning of its journey. The 38-year-military veteran entered politics in late December, building his bloc into a powerful insurgent force.

"We will not stand down from our civil duty to represent over a million citizens who searched for an alternative. We have an historic achievement under our belt. We have a reason to be proud," Gantz wrote.

Fight of His Life

The contest was the political fight of Netanyahu's life. If his victory is confirmed, the man widely known as Bibi will surpass in July Israel's founding father David Ben Gurion as the country's longest-serving prime minister.

He faced a tough challenge from Gantz, who offered the security credentials prized by Israelis and a clean-hands image, but lacked the political experience the prime minister accrued in a combined 13 years in office. In large part, the campaign was a referendum on Netanyahu's character, as Attorney General Avihai Mandelblit has said he intends to charge the 69-year-old in three graft cases.

Netanyahu has said he is innocent and will only stand down if convicted. With intensive negotiations to form a ruling coalition now underway, he's likely to demand that his future partners in government stand by him as he fights his way through the courts. Allies could even try to enact legislation protecting Netanyahu from prosecution as a sitting leader.

Netanyahu "will very likely demand from his coalition partners not to topple the coalition if he is indicted and this might be very much the case," Tel Aviv University lecturer Emmanuel Navon said on a conference call.

Volatile Region

For his backers, Netanyahu has offered strong leadership in a combustible region. He enjoys warm relations with President Donald Trump, who's delivered him jackpots like withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights captured from Syria in 1967.

Taking a lead from Trump, Netanyahu in his speech said he'd triumphed despite the best efforts of an antagonistic media, while "Make America Great Again" flags were waved by members of the audience.

Israel's economy grew nearly 75 percent during Netanyahu's decade in power, expanding even during the global recession, though the gains haven't done much to close the gap between rich and poor.

"They look at the bottom line," said Cohen, the Ariel University lecturer. "If the system is good for me, or at least better than the alternative, I'm willing to shut my eyes to any corruption."