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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Netanyahu faces first serious leadership challenge from his own party

By **Ruth Eglash**

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JERUSALEM — The first public cracks in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's own Likud party appeared over the weekend, days after the country's attorney general indicted the longtime leader on charges of bribery and fraud in three criminal cases.

The move comes after a year of political limbo that could send Israelis back to the polls for an unprecedented third general election in less than a year.

Gideon Saar, Netanyahu's most outspoken contender within Likud, told an Israeli news show Saturday that it was time for the party to hold primaries to decide its leader and keep the party from losing power. He said he himself could end the political crisis.

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On Sunday, Saar, 52, a former minister who returned to politics last year after a four-year hiatus, submitted a request to the party's central committee calling for a leadership vote to be held within the next three weeks — the period of time left for the country's lawmakers to try forming a long-elusive government before another general election must be called.

Since an inconclusive vote on Sept. 17, Netanyahu and his chief political rival, former military chief, Benny Gantz, have both tried and failed to cobble together a coalition government. On Wednesday, Israel's President Reuven Rivlin handed the mandate for forming the next government to the Knesset, Israel's parliament, but with both Likud and Gantz's Blue and White faction refusing to budge on key principles, the chances of a coalition emerging within the remaining time is slim.

In his appeal to the central committee, Saar called for snap primaries to take place as soon as possible to prevent “deteriorating into unnecessary third elections.”

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“Time after time, following the April election and after the September election, Netanyahu did not succeed in forming a government, yet he still received complete support from all of us,” said Saar in the television interview.

“Now the question is this, let’s say we go to a third election, I have not heard a single person who thinks that after a third or fourth or fifth or sixth election that Prime Minister Netanyahu will succeed in forming a government,” he said.

Political scientist Emmanuel Navon, who is also a former member of Likud’s central committee, described Saar’s move as a calculated risk, albeit a courageous one.

“He knows that Likud has the mentality of blind faithfulness to its leader, but the facts are clear, there is no way Netanyahu will form a government in the next 18 days, especially now he has been indicted,” he said.

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Navon said Saar was giving Likud members a choice — “stick with Netanyahu and lose power or pick me and stay in power.”

The party immediately released a statement after the interview, criticizing Saar, who has been involved in public clashes with Netanyahu in the past.

“It is regrettable to see that while Prime Minister Netanyahu is safeguarding Israel’s security on all fronts and is acting to preserve the Likud’s rule, Gideon Saar, as usual, has shown zero loyalty and maximum subversiveness,” read the statement.

Some of Netanyahu's staunchest supporters were also quick to speak out, dismissing the idea of challenging Netanyahu by holding primaries at this stage. They suggested that if a leadership vote were to be held, there would also need to be elections for the entire party list. Such a step would be wildly unpopular in Likud, which held a general primary less than a year ago. A leadership primary has not been held since 2015, when Netanyahu ran uncontested.

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The party's constitution, however, does not require that both primaries are held at the same time. The decision to hold a vote for the leadership first needs approval from the 3,800 members of the central committee, before opening it up to the party's roughly 150,000 members for a vote.

Even if a vote is held, it is unclear if Saar would be able to unseat Netanyahu. First elected at Likud chairman in 1993, Netanyahu withdrew briefly from politics after defeat in the 1999 election. He returned to lead the party in 2005 and since then has consolidated his position, dividing and weakening his opponents and facing very few challenges.

This time around it could be very different. With the legal charges and following his failure to twice form a government headed by Likud, there is likely to be a handful of other candidates alongside Saar who might also try their luck.