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WORLD

Israel's President Asks Benny Gantz to Form New Government

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu now faces a deepening struggle to stay in power as his corruption trial looms



Benny Gantz, leader of Blue and White party, left, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

PHOTO: AMIR COHEN/REUTERS

By Felicia Schwartz and Dov Lieber

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TEL AVIV—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is facing a tougher fight for his political survival after the country's president formally asked former military chief Benny Gantz to form a new government, multiplying Mr. Netanyahu's problems as he prepares to defend himself against corruption charges.

President Reuven Rivlin's decision, announced late Sunday but made official Monday, follows another inconclusive election earlier this month, the third in the space of a year. Four weeks of intense political maneuvering will now begin in which Mr. Gantz, who entered politics in late 2018, will try to stitch together a broad enough coalition from Israel's disparate parties to turn voter fatigue with Mr. Netanyahu into a change in government.

Mr. Gantz has more leverage this time than after the previous elections: His backers have more seats—61—in the Israeli parliament, the 120-member Knesset.

“I will make every effort to establish within days as broad a national and patriotic government as possible to serve all the citizens of Israel,” Mr. Gantz said Monday, speaking alongside Mr. Rivlin. “In the spirit of these days, I extend my elbows to every head of every faction and all those elected, including Benjamin Netanyahu.”

But he might not be able to oust Mr. Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving leader.

Mr. Netanyahu's bloc of 58 lawmakers, comprising right-wing religious parties and his Likud party, sent a letter Monday to the heads of Mr. Gantz's Blue and White party and the left-wing parties backing him, offering two other options to form a government: A national unity administration with Mr. Netanyahu serving as premier for two years and then Mr. Gantz serving for the next two years, or an emergency government led by Mr. Netanyahu that would last six months before Mr. Gantz attempts to form his own government.

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The political jockeying comes as Israel, which is still led by Mr. Netanyahu as a caretaker prime minister, is taking sweeping steps to confront the spread of the coronavirus, shutting schools and requiring anyone arriving from abroad to quarantine themselves for two weeks. Mr. Netanyahu's corruption trial, due to begin Tuesday, was delayed until May as part of the emergency measures. Mr. Netanyahu is being tried on bribery, fraud and breach-of-trust charges connected to allegations that he gave official favors to media moguls and businessmen in exchange for gifts and positive press coverage. He denies wrongdoing.

Mr. Gantz said little to indicate how he will try to form a government, other than that he has always wanted a united government. After receiving the mandate to try to form a government, Mr. Gantz invited each party leader in the right-wing bloc for a meeting and they all refused, their spokespeople said.

To become prime minister, Mr. Gantz will have to find sufficient common ground among the competing political parties that have vaulted him ahead of the embattled Mr. Netanyahu. He has four weeks to form a government. While the law allows for a two-week extension, he is unlikely to be granted one after so many elections.

Mr. Gantz's clearest options: form a minority government that would include his party, an alliance of left-wing parties and possibly Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu party and rely on outside support from 15 lawmakers from the Joint List, a group of Israeli Arab parties; or reach an agreement with Likud in which Mr. Netanyahu would serve as prime minister for a reduced period.

Mr. Gantz doesn't currently have enough support within his bloc for the first option, because Mr. Lieberman and some Blue and White lawmakers oppose an arrangement that requires the support of the Arab parties.

"Netanyahu is facing the most serious threat to his power for the past 20 years...he really has to be careful and make sure that he gets a good deal," said Emmanuel Navon, senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum.

Mr. Navon said Mr. Netanyahu may be tempted by an arrangement that would let him run to be president of Israel after serving as prime minister for a year. That could delay his trial for seven more years since presidents can't be prosecuted while in office, but it is a long shot for Blue and White to consider such an arrangement after running on a message that Mr. Netanyahu is corrupt and has been in power for too long.

Mr. Netanyahu may also try to seek a fourth election, which would give him more time, especially because the coronavirus makes it unclear when a vote could be held. Officials had tentatively planned for September if necessary.

"He always has his rabbits in the hat, so who knows?" said Gideon Rahat, a professor at Hebrew University and director of the political reform program at the Israel Democracy Institute.

Analysts have also floated the idea that Mr. Netanyahu could accept a plea bargain from the state prosecution that would see him leave office in return for the charges against him being dropped.

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