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MIDDLE EAST

Israel's Netanyahu Survives Challenge to His Fragile Coalition

The government crisis, while resolved for the moment, injected fresh uncertainty into U.S. hopes to unveil a peace plan in coming months



Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett gives a news conference on Nov. 19. PHOTO: THOMAS COEX/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By *Felicia Schwartz and Dov Lieber*

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TEL AVIV—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fended off a challenge to his fragile coalition Monday as a key partner backed away from a threat to quit the government, staving off snap elections but leaving the embattled leader's position so precarious that U.S. hopes to begin a peace process in the coming months could be thrown off course.

Naftali Bennett's decision to stay on as education minister and keep his Jewish Home party in the ruling coalition lessens the possibility of early elections, at least for now, though the government's majority remains razor thin, with 61 out of 120 seats in the Israeli parliament, or Knesset.

The government crisis, while resolved for the moment, injected fresh uncertainty into a peace plan that Mr. Trump said he anticipated would be introduced by February in a bid to begin discussions before the end of his current term.

The Trump administration is carefully watching the lead up to Israeli elections, U.S. officials said. Polls must take place by November 2019. The team charged with the peace negotiations doesn't want to add a possible trip wire for Mr. Netanyahu into the run-up to elections and could hold off on putting the proposals forward.

The prime minister, weakened by this crisis and his slim majority, faces security challenges among other obstacles. Israel is addressing a simmering conflict with Hamas in Gaza while trying to rout Iran's military presence in Syria.

Still, Mr. Netanyahu appears poised to try to maintain the coalition for the next several months, though to do so will require that everyone left in his government votes the prime minister's way.

"He's not completely out of the woods," said Emmanuel Navon, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum and a member of the Likud Central Committee. "We don't know if the coalition is actually going to hold...Nobody can travel abroad, nobody can be sick, nobody can go to the bathroom when there's a vote in the Knesset."

“Any schmuck in the coalition can blackmail him with whatever reason, it’s really hard to handle,” Mr. Navon added.

Mr. Bennett told a news conference Monday he would remain within the coalition to help Mr. Netanyahu tackle serious security challenges.

“I believe I will pay a certain political price in the coming hours and days” Mr. Bennett said. But losing a political battle against the prime minister, he said, was better than Hamas’s leader, Ismail Haniyeh, beating the state of Israel.

His announcement follows a week of crisis in Mr. Netanyahu’s government, triggered Wednesday after the resignation of Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman in protest at the government’s policy toward Gaza. Mr. Lieberman, who said Israel’s response to a flare up in violence with Gaza hadn’t been tough enough, subsequently withdrew his Yisrael Beiteinu party from government, costing the coalition five seats.

In the wake of that resignation, Mr. Bennett said he would withdraw his party unless he was appointed defense minister.

Mr. Netanyahu announced Sunday that he would keep the defense brief for himself. He is now the foreign minister, defense minister and health minister, as well as the prime minister.

Mr. Bennett said Monday he wasn’t sure how long the current government could last with just 61 seats, but said he aimed to see “the government working as a real right-wing government.”

Still, others in Mr. Netanyahu’s coalition on Monday urged snap elections. Mr. Lieberman called for elections last week and Mr. Bennett had done the same, though he reversed course Monday.

“It’s definitely the beginning of the election campaign for everyone. Everyone is trying strengthen their narratives...the coalition is not functioning,” Roy Folkman, head of the Kulanu faction in the Knesset told Army Radio on Monday.

Mr. Netanyahu will meet again this week with Kulanu’s leader, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, who has also called for early elections because of the coalition’s weak grasp on power.

Mr. Netanyahu has served as prime minister since 2009 and won three successive elections. He is favored to win again in a 2019 contest. He has been fighting to ward off snap elections, however, to put distance between himself and his moves in Gaza in a bid to secure more seats for his Likud party.

Also looming over him are a string of corruption probes, with indictments possible in the coming months, which analysts said are also figuring into his calculations about when to hold elections. Police have so far recommended Mr. Netanyahu be charged with criminal bribery, fraud and breach of trust in two corruption probes, but it is up to the attorney general to decide whether to bring charges.

Elections are required under Israeli law by November 2019.

Mr. Netanyahu’s response to months of conflict with Hamas in Gaza has been unpopular, with Mr. Bennett and Mr. Lieberman calling for a tougher response. Residents of the south have protested a recent cease-fire because they say it will allow a status quo of violent outbursts to continue.

Earlier Monday, Mr. Netanyahu told the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that toppling the government would be dangerous given the current security situation. Israel is in sustained conflict with Gaza and has been conducting airstrikes in Syria to try to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent military presence there.

“We are in a battle that still hasn’t ended. In such a sensitive time, it is irresponsible to topple the government,” Mr. Netanyahu said.

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