

Middle East

Israel's two main parties locked in dead heat as negotiations begin for new government

By James McAuley and
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TEL AVIV — Both main parties in Israel's do-over election were locked in a dead heat on Wednesday, with more than 90 percent of the vote tallied. The inconclusive result was almost certain to trigger weeks of political infighting, the same uncertainty that set this unusual process in motion in the first place.

As the results continued to trickle in, both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Israel's ruling Likud party, and his chief rival, Benny Gantz, head of the centrist secular Blue and White faction, immediately began jockeying for the endorsement of smaller parties whose support could propel either one to a ruling majority of 61 seats in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. The two parties have an estimated 32 seats each in the new parliament.

At the center of the stage was the unlikely figure of Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, who in the coming days will offer either Netanyahu or Gantz the first chance at forming a government. Rivlin gave no indication as to which way he would go, but he had already chosen Netanyahu after a similar inconclusive vote in April.

When Netanyahu failed to form a coalition after that vote, he triggered this unprecedented second election. Now Likud operatives are even discussing the prospect of a third vote in the months ahead.

In a statement, Rivlin's office made clear that a third election was to be avoided at all costs.

Political analysts underscored the complexity of the situation, arguably even more intractable than the aftermath of the April vote, in which Netanyahu had emerged a hair ahead of Gantz.

"It's not only that the two parties are the same size, but also the blocs are the same size," said Emmanuel Navon, a political scientist and foreign policy expert at Tel Aviv University. "The president will have to get them to form a unity government, and Rivlin can decide to give the job to whoever he wants to, although he must be realistic."

Netanyahu said he is prepared to meet with the leaders of other right-wing parties on Wednesday afternoon, and Gantz's Blue and White party announced late Tuesday that it had formed a negotiating

team.

Dressed in sports clothes, Gantz was up early Wednesday morning. “We are waiting to see the final results,” he said, speaking to reporters outside his home. “In a day or two we will know, and then we will create a strong and broad unity coalition in the State of Israel.”

As of Wednesday morning, Gantz had already reached out to Ayman Odeh, leader of the Joint List, the conglomeration of four Arab parties that scored remarkably well in Tuesday’s election, securing 12 seats.

“The main thing is that Israeli Arabs have made their voices heard, and what they want is to stop a right-wing government headed by Netanyahu,” Odeh said Wednesday in a news conference outside his home in Haifa. “There is clearly a price for incitement.”

A key feature of Netanyahu’s campaign had been race-baiting Israel’s Arab citizens, accusing them of voter fraud and of trying to “take over” the country.

“Our direction is very clear,” Odeh said. “We want to change Netanyahu’s government, but we are not in anyone’s pocket.”

Odeh said he would consider taking the unprecedented step of heading the country’s formal opposition, something that has never been done by an Arab party in Israel. That would give him the opportunity to meet with high-level visiting dignitaries and gain access to some sensitive security information.

In a meeting with journalists ahead of the election, Odeh said he would ask whoever turns to him for support to cancel the controversial Nation State Law, move forward with a peace process with the Palestinians and address some of the pressing social issues in Arab society in Israel, including infrastructure projects and stopping home demolitions.

But whether Odeh’s faction would support Gantz, a former general, was far from a given. His Joint List includes a communist party and members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Israel, both of which would have to agree.

Speaking outside his home in the Israeli settlement of Nokdim, Avigdor Liberman, Netanyahu’s erstwhile ally and the leader of the secular nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu faction, told Israeli media on Wednesday morning that to avert a democratic crisis, Netanyahu and Gantz have no choice but to form a broad coalition.

Israeli election: Netanyahu and Gantz parties in tie, *The Washington Post*
“It is a shame to waste more time; we need to get on this track as soon as possible,” Liberman said. His party has garnered about nine seats, making it key to any coalition.

Israel’s Central Election Committee said the final vote tally and seat assignments would likely come on Thursday afternoon.

The stakes of a loss for Netanyahu are high: Israel’s attorney general, Avichai Mandelblit, is scheduled to hold a hearing Oct. 3 on three criminal cases in which police have recommended indicting Netanyahu.

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