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Democracy Dies in Darkness

After two elections this year, Israeli leaders have less than 48 hours to stop a third

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JERUSALEM — With less than 48 hours to go until Israel is propelled into an unprecedented third election in under a year, political leaders Tuesday were slinging accusations over who was responsible for the deadlock.

A flurry of attempts over the past week to find a solution or form a new government was unsuccessful, and as the clock ticked toward the final deadline, the only thing the sides appeared to agree upon was a date for the next election: March 2, 2020.

After two rounds of voting, in April and September, and two 28-day stretches in which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his main rival, former military chief Benny Gantz, attempted and failed to cobble together a coalition, Israel's parliament, the Knesset, was given a final 21 days to find someone who might be able to end the stalemate.

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If none among the Knesset's 120 members comes forward with backing from 61 fellow lawmakers by midnight Wednesday evening, or if the Knesset moves to dissolve itself, the next election cycle will automatically get underway.

Israel's electoral system is based on proportional representation, with each party receiving a share of parliamentary seats proportionate to the number of votes cast for them. No party has ever won an outright majority, and most Israeli governments are a patchwork of parties, often at odds on key issues.

Since the previous round of voting, the two largest parties — Netanyahu's Likud and Gantz's Blue and White — have been unable to agree on the makeup of a new government and who should lead it. Although Blue and White gained one more parliamentary seat, Netanyahu commands a larger bloc of support from other Knesset factions.

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Complicating the situation further is hawkish former defense minister Avigdor Liberman. Head of a right-wing, secular party, Liberman has refused to endorse either party — Blue and White because it would need to rely on support from left-wing and Arab parties to form a government, and Likud because it is aligned with ultra-Orthodox and messianic Jewish factions.

Added to the mix is the formal criminal indictment issued last month by the attorney general against Netanyahu. Blue and White campaigned on a platform of not joining a government with a leader under indictment.

“I don’t believe a third election can be avoided at this stage,” said Emmanuel Navon, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum. “Neither Netanyahu nor Blue and White have an interest in joining a government based on conditions laid by the other side.”

Navon also said that there was little chance of Liberman changing his stance at the last minute and joining with either side. “It would go against everything he has stood for up until now,” Navon said.

Polls taken in recent days show that the outcome of a March election would be similar to results from the previous two elections, although several events expected in the coming weeks could affect the result.

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If an election does take place then, Netanyahu would face a strong challenge to his leadership from within Likud, for the first time in more than a decade. Already, Gideon Saar, a popular former minister, has made clear that he will run in leadership primaries, saying it’s the only way for the party to stay in power.

Also pending is the question of whether Netanyahu can be given the task of forming a government now that he is facing prosecution. A legal petition filed in the Supreme Court has demanded that the attorney general form an opinion on the matter in the coming weeks.

Finally, on Monday, Blue and White co-leader Yair Lapid, a former finance minister, announced that he would give up his right to helm the alliance and give his full support to Gantz as the leader, a step that analysts believe could boost the party's appeal.

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“We have a role to play, a historic role. We need to free the country, free the country from corruption,” Lapid said. “Free the country from blackmail, free the country from extremism, free the country from Netanyahu.”

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