



News Analysis: Israel's new gov't to be sworn in facing pressing challenges

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by Keren Setton

JERUSALEM, May 13 (Xinhua) -- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will swear in his fifth government on Thursday, ending a period of political paralysis in the country, over a year after his previous government collapsed.

After three consecutive elections that ended in inconclusive results, Netanyahu managed to secure a majority in the Israeli Knesset, the parliament. This paved the way for a unique power-sharing agreement in which he will be replaced after 18 months by his main political rival, Benny Gantz.

On Thursday, in an historic first, both Netanyahu and Gantz will be sworn in as prime ministers.

What tipped the balance after the third election held in mid-March was the outbreak of COVID-19 immediately after. The two sides finally managed to reach an agreement.

Netanyahu and Gantz vowed to cooperate in order to lead the country through the crisis and the major economic fallout which is now overshadowing the health crisis.

As the country slowly eases into a new routine with strict lockdown measures being lifted, a new government couldn't be more timely, needed now more than ever before.

So far, 258 Israelis have died from the virus and over 16,500 have contracted it. Unemployment rate has reached a record high, jumping from less than 4 percent prior to the pandemic to over 25 percent as many sectors have been hit severely.

"The first challenge is really going to be the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis: unemployment, recession, many businesses have gone bankrupt," said Emmanuel Navon, a senior lecturer at the Kohelet Forum think tank.

He said Israel has been in "an election mode" for the past eighteen months without any approved state budget, one of the reasons why a coalition is needed to approve the budget and handle the crisis.

The coalition agreement has the two rivals coming together after a year of them lashing out at each other. According to the deal, only until the COVID-19 crisis is over, the government can pass legislation on other major issues.

One of these matters is the possible move Israel could begin towards annexation of parts of the West Bank as early as July 2020.

This is part of the implementation of the so-called "peace plan" by U.S. President Donald Trump. The Palestinians vehemently oppose the plan.

the deal between them requires an agreement from both of them on any moves, any decision on annexation will have to take into account the international climate.

Trump has been a valuable ally to Netanyahu, who will likely pose little opposition to an annexation decision. However, with Trump himself being up for re-election in November, such a move might be risky for both leaders.

Annexation is a great gamble for Netanyahu and could have major repercussions. In recent days, it is reported that France has been mulling punitive measures together with other EU countries against Israel should it proceed with the unilateral move.

A one-sided maneuver on Israel's part could also trigger a Palestinian response.

Netanyahu's biography does not contain grand decisions, but cautious steps with careful political considerations.

"He's a very cautious person. His approach to policy is very conservative whether comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," said Navon.

Meanwhile, another pressing issue will be Netanyahu's upcoming court case. The Israeli leader faces three indictments of corruption and is scheduled to make his first appearance in court at the end of this month.

After so many election campaigns, it seems his public stance will not be severely damaged, perhaps even contrary.

"This is not going to weaken him, but it will strengthen him especially among his voters," said Eyal Lewin, Assistant Professor at the Political Science department of Ariel University.

Netanyahu seeks to remain in power in order to conduct his trial from a position of strength.

There are potentially many sticking points which could break the superficial bond between Gantz and Netanyahu. Netanyahu's upcoming trial, Gantz's political weakness, different opinions on relations with the Palestinians and many other issues could be the glue that would make the agreement stick or the fractures that ultimately break it.

In Israel, Netanyahu is considered a political magician and many believe he will not give up his seat as stipulated by the agreement.

"After three consecutive elections with no clear result, I think nobody has an appetite to go to an early election again, so my expectation is that this coalition will actually last for three years," said Navon.

"Usually what makes a cohesive coalition is the fear of voters and I am not sure that the fear right now is enough to stick them all together," Lewin said.

With many pressing matters on the agenda that could lead to serious cracks in the coalition, it could mean a short-lived government. But with both Netanyahu and Gantz needing the government for their political goals, the government may exceed the expectations of many and survive. Enditem