



The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

Israel Prepares to Hold Its Third Election in Under a Year

Israel is set to hold its third election in a year, as the political deadlock in the country stretches on. The leading vote-getters from the previous election, Benny Gantz and Benjamin Netanyahu, were both unable to form a ruling coalition in the Knesset, Israel's legislative body. Therefore, the previous leader, Prime Minister Netanyahu, remains in charge of the government on an interim basis. However, Netanyahu's political future remains in limbo as he battles an indictment on corruption charges. The next election is scheduled to be held in March 2020, and early polls predict a similar result to the previous election, in which Mr. Gantz's Blue and White Party finishes slightly ahead of Netanyahu's Likud Party, but without the requisite support to form a ruling coalition.

Together, the Blue and White and Likud parties hold a strong majority in the 120-seat Knesset. However, the two parties have a strong distrust of each other, and are reticent to form a coalition together. Therefore, both parties were forced to seek coalition support from smaller parties in the Knesset. Prime Minister Netanyahu has traditionally relied on the support of the right-wing and religious parties in Israel. Those parties, in tandem with his Likud Party, only represent 55 seats in the Knesset, which is short of the 61 required to form a coalition. Netanyahu looked for the support of a former cabinet minister in his cabinet, Avigdor Lieberman, who split from Netanyahu to create his own secular nationalist party, Yisrael Beitenu. However, Lieberman rejected these advances, and pushed Netanyahu to come to an agreement with Benny Gantz to form a ruling coalition of Israel's two largest parties. This did not happen, and Netanyahu was unable to find coalition partners among the left-wing and Arab parties also in the Knesset.

Benny Gantz sought the support of the Joint List, a party that represents Arabs in Israel. However, Gantz was seen as being too prone to military solutions that harmed Arab populations in the West Bank. Gantz also looked toward the ultra-orthodox members of the Knesset for their support, but they were reluctant to abandon the Likud Party, with whom they are former coalition partners. When Gantz was forced to concede his inability to form a coalition government, he blamed Netanyahu for putting himself over the good of the country in not accepting a partnership between Likud and the Blue and White.

Prime Minister Netanyahu is currently under indictment on three charges of corruption, which has led to questions over his political future. He has said that he will stand in the election, which means he will defend himself in court simultaneously. Observers have noted that Netanyahu's standing in the election could give him a favorable position in negotiating a plea deal with prosecutors. A potential guilty plea could see him agree to retire from public life, in exchange for avoiding a prison sentence. Netanyahu also faces a battle to remain leader of Likud, as he is being challenged by Gideon Sarr, a young and upcoming member of Likud, for the party's nomination in the upcoming election.

Early polls suggest that the upcoming election will be nearly identical to the previous two, in which Likud and Blue and White could not be separated. A change of leadership in the Likud Party could affect this, as could a harsh sentence on Netanyahu. If neither of these happen, and the two parties maintain their current support, Israel could be in an unprecedented situation where a fourth election is held.