Israeli President Rivlin Tasks Gantz with Forming a Coalition Government

Following consultations with Knesset lawmakers, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin has granted Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz with the mandate to form a new coalition government. Gantz was chosen after receiving the support of parties representing 61 seats, a slim majority of the 120-seat Knesset, and will now have 28 days to form a coalition government. Rivlin's decision to task Gantz with the first opportunity to do so comes two weeks after Israel's third general election in less than a year, which like the previous ones, failed to produce a clear winner. It also comes as a political blow to incumbent Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was passed up in favor of Gantz after his 58-seat bloc fell three seats shy of the necessary majority. Netanyahu also faces an impending corruption trial on multiple criminal charges which has been postponed until May due to the ongoing coronavirus crisis.

In the initial aftermath of the March 2nd election, it appeared as though Netanyahu's ruling Likud party had the edge over Gantz's Blue and White party. Likud secured 36 seats in the Israeli Knesset to the Blue and White's 33 seats, and was also able to form an alliance with four smaller right-wing religious parties which gave them a total bloc of 58 seats. However, this still fell a few seats short of the needed 61-seat majority and opened the door for Gantz. His Blue and White party was able to forge its own alliances, in large part due to a common goal of ousting embattled and criminally-indicted incumbent Prime Minister Netanyahu. This sentiment was shared by three partner groups: The Joint List, the secular nationalist party Yisrael Beiteinu, and the Labor-Meretz faction. During consultations with President Rivlin, these parties recommended that Gantz become the next prime minister, giving him a narrow 61-vote majority and prompting Rivlin to hand Gantz the mandate to form a coalition government.

Israel's political crisis has been exacerbated in recent weeks by the worldwide coronavirus pandemic. This past weekend, Israel implemented new nationwide emergency measures to try and mitigate the spread of the virus, including banning gatherings of more than 10 people and closing schools and universities. In the face of the crisis, Prime Minister Netanyahu proposed that he lead a national emergency government for six months. However, Gantz expressed doubt about Netanyahu's true intentions saying that if he was sincere in his offer, the Prime Minister would send a negotiating team to the Blue and White party as opposed to making the announcement of the proposal on social media.

Following the previous two inconclusive elections, both Gantz and Netanyahu failed to form coalition governments when tasked with the opportunity to do so. It will likely be just as difficult for Gantz this time as well, with him needing to establish a coalition with groups that are ideologically very different and seem to only share the common goal of ousting Prime Minister Netanyahu from office. Nevertheless, there may also be a heightened sense of urgency this time around as Israel does its best to avoid yet another election, particularly in the midst of a global health crisis.