

Israel goes back to elections as Netanyahu fails to form coalition



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks with the press following the vote for Knesset dispersal.. (photo credit: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM)

Exactly one month after the 21st Knesset was sworn in, a majority of the Knesset voted late Wednesday night to disperse and initiate an unprecedented repeat election on September 17.

It was the first time in Israeli history that a candidate for prime minister failed to form a coalition after being given the task by the president after an election.

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the Likud faction ahead of the vote that he had not succeeded in reaching a compromise with Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Liberman on the controversial haredi (ultra-Orthodox) conscription bill, and that he had also tried unsuccessfully to woo MKs from the opposition to join his government.

"The State of Israel is going to elections because of the Likud's refusal to accept our proposal," Liberman said as he entered the Knesset plenum. "This is a complete surrender of the Likud to the ultra-Orthodox. We will not be partners in a government of Jewish law."

Tourism Minister Yariv Levin, head of the Likud's negotiating team, told reporters "it's over," as he arrived at the Likud meeting after his last negotiation had failed.

Environmental Protection Minister Ze'ev Elkin said that there was no choice but to hold new elections, due to Liberman's intransigence and refusal to accept "1,000 compromises" that had been offered throughout the last week.

The vote – taken just after the midnight deadline by which Netanyahu needed to tell President Reuven Rivlin whether he had been able to form a governing coalition – was 74 to 45 in favor of dispersing.

Opposition MKs shouted "shame, shame, shame" in unison ahead of the vote.

The Likud initiated the bill to dissolve the Knesset rather than give Rivlin a chance to appoint someone other than Netanyahu to form a government.

In presenting the bill to the Knesset, Likud MK Miki Zohar said that he is "disappointed by the situation, but we were forced into it." He admitted that the decision "would not be remembered positively in our history."

"The Left asks us why we didn't give [Blue and White leader] Benny Gantz a chance to form the coalition," Zohar said. "Two and a half million people voted as if they had two votes, for their party and for [Netanyahu]... despite knowing about the [pre-indictment] hearing [for the prime minister on corruption charges]. They didn't want Gantz."

According to Zohar, those calling to let Gantz form the government are "saying to give the opportunity to the minority to form the government at the expense of the majority. The majority rules, while the minority has rights. That is the meaning of democracy."

The bill called the election for September 17, but there were several other options the coalition was set to vote on in the second reading. Netanyahu asked the other parties to back September 17, because that is what Yisrael Beytenu preferred, and he needed them to have a majority in favor of dissolving the Knesset.

In the unsuccessful coalition talks, the Likud had proposed that as soon as the government would be formed, Liberman's original conscription law would be presented, as written and in his language, for the approval of the Knesset plenum. After its approval, there would be more negotiations when the law would be prepared for its final readings.

If that agreement is not reached by the end of July, the party said, and in

accordance with the decision of the High Court of Justice, the current arrangement that has exempted haredim from being drafted would expire, and the compulsory service law would apply to all. The ultra-Orthodox parties would therefore have to choose between Liberman's version of the law or a return to the original law, which means full mobilization for haredim, the Likud said.

"The proposal has now been submitted to the parties, and we await their positive response in order to form a right-wing government tonight and prevent unnecessary elections," the party wrote.

In response, United Torah Judaism said that it would back another party to lead the coalition.

"We won't retreat beyond what we have agreed to," UTJ leader Deputy Health Minister Ya'acov Litzman said in his initial response to the Likud statement. "I still believe that a government can be formed. I'm on my way to sign on the coalition agreement."

Liberman also initially rejected the proposal, saying it was not exactly what he had said all along about the conscription bill needing to be passed into law as is.

The proposal was made after the Likud reported that it had secured agreements with 60 MKs from the Likud, Kulanu, UTJ, Shas and the Union of Right-Wing Parties, leaving it only one MK short of a majority coalition.

After Kulanu denied that it had signed any documents and insisted it won't sign unless the coalition would include 61 MKs, the Likud said the deal with Kulanu was complete and ready to be signed, pending Liberman joining the government.

Hours ahead of the deadline, Liberman stood his ground on the matter of haredi conscription.

"We repeatedly said we want the original [haredi] conscription bill, nothing else," Liberman said. "People claiming that there's a compromise, when it was just 10 millimeters of movement, are not familiar with the bill."

Liberman said that proposed compromises "empty the bill of all content," and he will not agree to them.

The bill, which the Defense Ministry drafted under Liberman's leadership, sets

rising annual targets for haredi conscription in the IDF.

"The bill is good for the IDF, for the haredim and for Israel," Liberman stated. "We have to be reasonable. I am appealing to the haredi MKs' reason.... There is no better bill than this. Let it pass with you abstaining."

The Likud attacked Liberman fiercely throughout the day.

"Liberman continues to mislead," the Likud said in an official statement. "He says 'I will consider' to every offer and stalls for a few days. His goal is to end Netanyahu's career and replace him."

The Likud mocked Liberman for portraying himself as the defender of secular people, after he prevented there being a secular mayor of Jerusalem.

"For a few seats and his hunger for power, he is dragging an entire country to elections," the Likud concluded.

Yisrael Beytenu responded by condemning the Likud's tone and reiterating that Liberman's views on the conscription bill have been consistent.

Earlier, a Likud spokesman confirmed that offers were made to the Labor Party and the Blue and White Party. In talks with Labor head Avi Gabbay, Netanyahu offered him the Defense or Finance ministries and three other ministerial positions, in an effort to convince him to join his government.

A Labor spokesman confirmed that the party received an offer from the Likud that included stopping bills that the party believes would harm democracy, including the Immunity Law. But the spokesman said the offer was considered and rejected.

Labor MKs expressed outrage that Gabbay mulled the offer for a full day before telling them. By contrast, Blue and White said no immediately.

Opposition MKs took advantage of the nearly 12-hour debate to bring up their grievances against the government that was never formed.

Many lamented the estimated NIS 475 million that the election will cost, according to the Finance Ministry, saying that taxpayer money would be better spent elsewhere. In addition, industry experts estimated that the day off for Election Day will cost the economy NIS 2 billion.

“Likud MKs, you also have the option of showing some courage and saying no to Netanyahu,” Blue and White MK Miki Haimovich said.

Another MK from Blue and White, Yoaz Hendel, said: “Have an opinion. If you’re on the Right, then Right; Left, then Left. But say something other than ‘Bibi!’ Is that Right? When it comes to Hamas, you turn into Peace Now. When there are [corruption] allegations, you become defense attorneys. You turned into dishrags.”

Blue and White MK Ram Shefa hosted a trivia game from the Knesset stage, asking who said various quotes from politicians, and offering champagne, cigars and trays of take-out meals - references to Netanyahu’s corruption investigations.

Alon Einhorn and Tzvi Joffre contributed to this report.

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