

Netanyahu's Coalition in Israel Survives, for Now



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, center, in Jerusalem on Monday. He rebuked disaffected ministers in a televised address on Sunday. Credit: Abir Sultan/EPA, via Shutterstock

JERUSALEM — The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel appeared to have averted collapse on Monday — at least for now — after a hawkish coalition partner backed down from a threat to defect, which probably would have forced early elections.

Mr. Netanyahu's right-wing and religious coalition, led by his conservative Likud party, was weakened by the resignation last week of the hard-line defense minister, Avigdor Lieberman, and the withdrawal of his party, Yisrael Beiteinu, leaving the government with a parliamentary majority of just one.

The Jewish Home party and its leader, Naftali Bennett, had threatened to leave the coalition, too, which would have left the government without a majority. But on Monday, in a sharp turnaround, the party retreated.

With elections due in November 2019, the remaining coalition partners are already in campaign mode and experts said the brittle government was unlikely to last more than a few months.

This latest political crisis was precipitated by sharp disagreements within the governing parties, ostensibly over the handling of the latest conflict in Gaza. Critics said that the rebellious lawmakers were more concerned about positioning themselves with voters for the next elections.

Mr. Netanyahu rebuked the disaffected ministers in a televised address on Sunday, accusing them of putting personal and political considerations before the country's interests and saying it would be "irresponsible" to topple the government at such a complex time for national security.

The volatile situation along the Gaza border remains a challenge for the government, as does the northern border, where Israel is grappling what it sees as a graver threat of Iranian entrenchment in Syria.

Other factors that could further destabilize the government in the coming weeks and months include contentious legislation on the agenda, such as a revised law on how the military draft applies to ultra-Orthodox men.

President Trump is expected to present his long-awaited Israeli-Palestinian peace plan which could prove awkward for Mr. Netanyahu and his coalition partners if it demands difficult Israeli concessions, particularly regarding Jerusalem. Mr. Netanyahu is heavily invested in his close relationship with the Trump administration, which recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moved the United States embassy from Tel Aviv to the contested holy city.

And Mr. Netanyahu, plagued by corruption investigations, faces possible bribery charges. The attorney general is expected to decide if the prime minister should be indicted in several graft cases, subject to a hearing, perhaps by early next year.

Reuven Hazan, a professor of political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said a government with 61 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, or Parliament, can survive, as it did for a year after the 2015 elections.

"But we are in an election year," Professor Hazan said. "That means some

legislators know they have no chance of returning to the Knesset and are more independent.”



Education Minister Naftali Bennett, left, and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked at a news conference in Jerusalem on Monday. They had been expected to step down from the government. Credit Sebastian Scheiner/Associated Press

Mr. Netanyahu has threatened to break up the government in the past but wanted to preserve it for now, Professor Hazan said, as he did not want to go to elections over Gaza or with his coalition partners determining the timing.

“In the months to come, it will be the draft law or something else,” he added. “Netanyahu will find a reason and break up the government, but he will decide when and on what basis.”

The political drama had been building over several days, leading some commentators to describe Monday’s turn of events as an anticlimax.

After Mr. Lieberman quit, the education minister, Mr. Bennett, demanded that he be named defense minister; he was rebuffed by the prime minister on Friday. The Jewish Home party had threatened to quit the coalition if Mr. Bennett, who has espoused far more belligerent positions on security than Mr. Netanyahu, did not get the job.

In a high-stakes move, Mr. Bennett and his colleague Ayelet Shaked, the justice minister, also from Jewish Home, announced on Sunday night that they would be making a statement on Monday morning. Even people in their own party said the expectation was that they would resign.

In the end, perhaps heedful of Mr. Netanyahu's warnings against bringing down one of the most right-wing governments Israel has known, a move that could have had unpredictable consequences, they backed down.

Mr. Bennett and Ms. Shaked presented their reversal as a result of their dedication to the national interest.

"It is possible to change direction," Mr. Bennett said. He added that he hoped Mr. Netanyahu was serious when he hinted on Sunday that Israel was planning stronger military action in Gaza.

Ms. Shaked said Jewish Home would "continue to be the national compass of this government," adding, in a dig at Mr. Lieberman, "We will not flee from responsibility."

Ofir Akunis, a Likud minister, enumerated on Monday some of the security, economic and diplomatic challenges ahead. "Soon the American president will present his 'deal of the century,' " he told Israel Radio, referring to Mr. Trump's peace proposal, "and this will be a huge challenge, primarily for the right wing, because it is liable to contain the two states for two peoples formula, and we must fight this, from inside the government."

Tamar Zandberg, leader of the left-wing Meretz Party, which sits in opposition, decried what she called the "empty and hollow" acts and threats of the previous days and said she "did not believe a word" said by Mr. Bennett, Ms. Shaked or Mr. Netanyahu.

Mr. Netanyahu could try to shore up his coalition with a couple of legislators who may consider crossing from the opposition, and he may try to cement loyalties by giving away the job of foreign minister, which he currently holds himself, and by filling some other vacant posts.

A preliminary vote on holding early elections has been scheduled in Parliament on Wednesday, but it seemed unlikely to pass, with no coalition partner eager to be

blamed for toppling the government.

As one television political analyst, Amit Segal, put it over the weekend, the government was “in its death throes, but nobody is willing to sign the death certificate.”

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