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'Netanyahu is the real loser'

The second election in Israel this year ends again with a stalemate. Paul Pasch on what that means for a new government

Read this interview in German.

Like in April, the September parliamentary elections in Israel have once again led to a stalemate between Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud and Benny Gantz's centrist alliance Blue and White. Will Netanyahu lose his office this time?

If the unofficial result is confirmed and Blue and White, led by former Chief of General Staff Benny Gantz, wins 33 out of 120 seats in the Knesset, it's highly likely that President Reuven Rivlin will instruct Gantz to form a government. The centre-left camp currently has 58 mandates and the right-wing camp 55, while Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beytenu party ('Israel Our Home') seems to be the king maker with nine mandates. Since Blue and White will become the largest party and Benjamin Netanjahu had already failed to form a government in April, Benny Gantz will presumably be commissioned to form the government.

Netanyahu, who campaigned with a photo of Donald Trump and the slogan 'Netanyahu – a different league', is the real loser. After the merger of Likud and the neoliberal party Kulanu, their joint faction originally counted 39 seats. With the 31 mandates they achieved now, that means a loss of eight mandates.

What does this mean for the process of forming a new government?

At the moment, it's completely open what a new government could look like. The most obvious option would be a grand coalition of Blue and White and Likud with rotation. What matters here is which party actually gets the most votes and claims leadership. There are scenarios with and without Netanyahu and with and without Lieberman. Netanyahu's potential heirs in the Likud have so far held back.

Netanyahu is backed by Likud's 55 mandates and the right-wing and national-religious parties. In order to lay claim to the formation of a government, he would either need the six mandates of the Avoda-Gesher alliance or the nine mandates of Lieberman. Although the Labor Party Avoda's Amir Peretz has repeatedly ruled out a coalition with Netanyahu and Lieberman and emphasised that he doesn't want to cooperate with the religious parties, such scenarios are eminently possible.

Political observers do not rule out that Netanyahu could offer Avigdor Lieberman a rotation in the office of prime minister. Furthermore, Netanyahu could offer Amir Peretz the Ministry of Defence and Gesher leader Orly Levy-Abukasis the Ministry of Finance. It's suspected that Amir Peretz will throw his principles overboard if he's promised to be elected president in two years' time.

Can we also expect a U-turn from Avigdor Lieberman? He had previously ruled out joining a coalition with Netanyahu's Likud and the religious parties and presented himself as politically conservative, but not religious.

Lieberman will probably tip the scales with the nine mandates of his Yisrael Beytenu party, as he can block Netanyahu's government majority. In public, Lieberman favours a grand liberal coalition between Likud, Blue and White and his nationalist-secular party. Although Lieberman strongly polarised against 'advancing religious coercion' during the election campaign, he leaves all options open 'if his conditions are met'. However, he has rejected any cooperation with the Arab parties.

Lieberman's reputation has increased because he opposes the Prime Minister, who has been in office for ten years. Apparently, Lieberman, as a strong man, was able to considerably increase his following. While in the past, he was mainly elected by immigrants from the states of the former Soviet Union, he can now fall back on a broad voter base from all political camps.

Netanyahu is facing charges of corruption. With a right-wing religious coalition he could have probably introduced a law that would protect him from prosecution. How likely is it that he will be charged?

In fact, Netanyahu is threatened with three court cases for bribery, fraud and breach of trust. On 2 and 3 October, he will undergo a hearing before the Attorney General, the outcome of which will determine whether he will be indicted. It's expected that charges will be filed by the end of the year.

Netanyahu, who undoubtedly strives for immunity from prosecution,

is therefore very interested in a right-wing government. His 'natural' coalition partners would support his request in parliament. This also includes Avigdor Lieberman's party. However, since a grand coalition between Blue and White and Likud seems most likely, Netanyahu's efforts to achieve immunity will probably not have a majority in the next Knesset. Blue and White has made it clear that under no circumstances will they form a coalition with someone who has to answer in court.

This in turn could mean a replacement of Netanyahu at the head of Likud. It's generally assumed that, at the latest, an indictment against Netanyahu will also bring about his political end.

The Labour Party Avoda could only gain six seats. Why were they again unable to convince the electorate?

Avoda was de facto the only party that put content at the centre of its election campaign, especially concerning the topic of social justice. For example, it presented a detailed programme for a fair economy. But the election campaign did not revolve around the growing social divide in the country or security or peace issues. It was all about Netanyahu's future. The Israeli left and the centre camp were united in ending Netanyahu's long-standing reign. Therefore, as in the previous April elections, many traditional Avoda voters voted Blue and White.

By the way, this is also what the two social democratic parties Avoda and Meretz hope for: the votes did not change from the left to the right bloc, but moved – for tactical reasons – within the centre-left spectrum. Since the future of the multi-party list Blue and White is anything but certain, it's now a matter of pulling these voters back into their mother parties.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



Paul Pasch
Tel Aviv

Paul Pasch heads the office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Israel.