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Netanyahu and Gantz Agree To Form “Unity” Government in Israel

Seventeen months of political turmoil in Israel appear to be over as current prime minister and head of the Likud Party Benjamin Netanyahu and Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz have agreed to form a new “unity” government. The deal announced Monday will allow Israel to avoid a fourth general election in less than two years.



A series of elections over the past year and a half have failed to produce a winner with enough Knesset seats (61) to form a government. In the [last election](#), the coalition led by Netanyahu claimed victory but was only able to garner 59 seats, while Gantz’s coalition could only obtain 39 seats. Both men failed when given the opportunity to form a government.

Gantz had previously dismissed the possibility of a unity government with Netanyahu, saying that he would never serve with a prime minister who was under [indictment](#), as Netanyahu currently is, on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. Netanyahu has repeatedly denied all charges and has referred to them as a political “witch hunt.”

But the coronavirus pandemic and the need for a functioning government persuaded the two bitter rivals to put aside their differences and come to the agreement.

“I promised the State of Israel a national emergency government that will work to save lives and livelihoods of Israeli citizens,” Netanyahu declared.

“We prevented a fourth election,” Gantz said. “We will protect our democracy and fight against the coronavirus.”

Under the terms of the deal, Netanyahu, who was the previous prime minister and who has served in a caretaker role since December of 2018, will remain on as prime minister for 18 more months. After that, Gantz will take over as prime minister. Each man will serve as the other’s vice-prime minister.

The peace plan put forward by President Trump — which both men agreed was a good idea — will be able to be implemented as early as July when maps are set to be finalized. This will allow Israel to assert its sovereignty over the disputed regions of Judea and Samaria.

A controversial portion of the agreement states that both Netanyahu and Gantz will be provided residences funded by the government.

Under the agreement, the Likud coalition led by Netanyahu will receive control over Finance, Health, Internal Security, Construction, Transportation, and Education ministries while the Blue and White



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coalition will head the Defense, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Economy, Communications, and Culture bureaucracies.

Thirty-six ministers and 16 government deputies will be split evenly by the two coalitions, which means that several of Netanyahu's current appointees will lose their jobs in the near future.

Despite the "unity government" nomenclature, not everyone is happy with the new arrangement. Thousands of mask-wearing protesters, all standing two meters apart, filled Tel Aviv's Rabin Square to [voice their displeasure](#) over the arrangement. Many of them were angered by the appearance of corruption in the Netanyahu government.

"A person with indictments can't appoint a police chief, a state prosecutor, an attorney general, the judges who will deal with his case. That is Netanyahu's list of demands," said Knesset member Yair Lapid of the opposition party Yesh Atid. "That's how democracies die in the 21st century. They're not wiped out by tanks overrunning parliament. They die from within."

The protest brought together disparate groups, as others in the crowd cited the proposed annexation of Judea and Samaria as the main reason that the unity government should not be pursued.

"It's not easy for me to stand among some of the speakers here tonight, but we need to see the main point — only through a joint Jewish-Arab struggle can we succeed," said Ayman Odeh, the leader of four Arab-Israeli parties which Netanyahu has derided as "terror supporters."

Others blamed Gantz for the arrangement, believing he had caved in under pressure. "The man who was supposed to be the prime minister who would bring change, decided to raise a white flag instead of winning," said Tamar Zandberg, chairwoman of the left-wing Meretz Party. "Gantz destroyed the hope of a majority of Israelis and sold the mandate that the majority gave him to a corrupt inciter. This is not an emergency government but there is an emergency situation for our democracy."

On its surface, a "unity" government in a time of emergency seems like a good idea. To put aside differences in a time of public emergency sounds like a logical thing to do. But this doesn't feel like that. It feels more like a capitulation.

Netanyahu was a measly two seats from gaining an outright majority. A cynical person might say that he pushed this "unity" government in order to stay in charge for the next 18 months so he can still be prime minister while the indictments against him are litigated.

The coronavirus scare will be over at some point — hopefully very soon. But Netanyahu and Israel will have to live with this "unity" government long after the emergency is over.

Photo of Gantz and Netanyahu on giant billboard: AP Images

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