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Israel on its way to a government of national unity: the political crisis is suspended

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On 20 April, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Likud) and the leader of the largest opposition party Benny Gantz (Blue & White) signed an agreement to form a coalition government. This happened one and a half months after the parliamentary elections, and a year and a half since the start of the country's political crisis. Both groups will receive an equal number of ministers, even though the right wing led by Netanyahu has more than twice the number of seats in parliament than Gantz's centrist group (53 to 19). Both leaders will act as head of government on a rotational basis. First, Netanyahu will be prime minister for a year and a half, and in October 2021 he will be replaced by Gantz, who until then will act as defence minister and deputy prime minister. Blue & White will be given the portfolios of foreign affairs and justice, among others. The coalition will probably also include two ultra-Orthodox parties, as well as several individual representatives of the left. Officially the new coalition will be formed after Israel's Independence Day celebrations on 28-29 April. However, if this process is not completed by 7 May and the parliament fails to nominate a prime minister, new parliamentary elections will be called.

The coalition agreement contains a number of commitments, including planned territorial annexations in the West Bank, a reorganisation of the judicial system, and calling up Orthodox Jews to military service. However, its most important part is a complex system of mutual guarantees and safeguards which will give both leaders extensive opportunities to keep each other in mutual checkmate and force each other to respect the agreement's principles.

Commentary

- The coalition agreement will probably bring a temporary end to the political crisis that has been ongoing in Israel since December 2018. Three early parliamentary elections failed to bring a result, and the country has been ruled by Netanyahu's interim government, which suffered from a weak democratic mandate and struggled with a number of constitutional restrictions. With the signing of the coalition agreement, Israel now has the chance to regain political stability. If Netanyahu and Gantz succeed in forming a government, they will have a secure majority in parliament (about 72 out of 120 seats). According to a poll taken on 21 April, over 60% of Israelis will support it.

- However, the sustainability and effectiveness of the planned government are questionable. For the past year and a half Netanyahu and Gantz have been leading two clashing political camps. The leading demand of Blue & White was the removal of Netanyahu from power because of criminal charges against him concerning corruption and abuses of office. The right wing, for its part, accused Gantz of ineptitude and being ready to make deals with forces hostile to Israel (the Arab minority). Although the conclusion of the coalition agreement is a revolution on the Israeli political scene (more than half of Blue & White's deputies have now left the group in protest against the agreement with Netanyahu) and has redefined the existing dividing lines in Israeli politics, the level of trust between the coalition partners is very low. This can be seen in the shape of the proposed cabinet, which will consist of two blocks of ministers and, in effect, two decision-making centres. This arrangement runs the risk of permanent conflicts and paralysis in cooperation. Another potential problem area concerns whether the provisions of the coalition agreement can be legally enforced, especially regarding the rotation of prime ministers. One of the conditions for confirming the coalition is that the Knesset will adopt the laws guaranteeing that Gantz will take over as PM in October 2021; however, there are question marks over their real legal force and whether they can be effectively enforced. This leaves Gantz open to the risk that his partner will not stick to the arrangements. Some commentators have evened suggest that Netanyahu is not ready for a coalition government at all, and that the agreement is only a tactical move which will allow him to gain time and wait for the next parliamentary elections.
- The coalition's cohesion will be reduced on one hand by the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic effects, and on the other by the upcoming criminal trial of Netanyahu. The Israeli government's quick and efficient response to the coronavirus's appearance has been positively received by the public; at the same time, however, Israelis are increasingly feeling the economic impact of the epidemic, and they see the government's countermeasures as inadequate (especially the SME sector). As public dissatisfaction increases, it will undoubtedly generate tensions within the coalition and threaten its existence, as will the criminal trial of Netanyahu scheduled for the end of May. The coalition agreement regulates possible scenarios related to the trial in detail, ensuring the maximum political security for Netanyahu. For example, in the event that the Supreme Court of Israel rules that a person charged with criminal charges cannot be prime minister, elections will automatically be called. At the same time, it is hard to imagine that the inevitable weakening of the prime minister as a result of the trial would not affect the functioning of the coalition.
- As for its political programme, the new government will certainly be more centrist than the previous one; this will primarily affect domestic policy, including the temperature of the political debate. Israel's foreign and state security policies are unlikely to change significantly. The conclusion of the coalition agreement opens the way for territorial annexations in the West Bank, which was given the green light by Donald Trump's peace plan of January this year. Although Blue & White's position is less radical than that of Likud in this matter, and Gantz has guaranteed his party the right to a separate vote, annexation may begin as early as July this year, if the US accepts its scope. This move will put the new Israeli government on a clear collision course with Brussels and the major EU member states, who will not accept unilateral annexation.