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The fifth Netanyahu cabinet. The end of the political crisis in Israel

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A new government was sworn in on 17 May in Israel. It will be led by Benjamin Netanyahu—for the fifth time. The government has been formed by right-wing and centrist blocs led by Netanyahu and the former Chief of General Staff Benny Gantz. Gantz will replace Netanyahu as prime minister in November 2021. Until that time he will serve as Defence Minister and 'alternate prime minister'. Rotational deals have also been introduced for some ministerial positions. The vote of confidence was carried by 73 (out of 120) deputies representing a broad political spectrum.

The government's parliamentary base consists of: right-wing Likud (36 seats), Blue and White (15) who were until recently in opposition, two ultra-Orthodox parties (9 and 7) and several individual left-wing and right-wing politicians (6 seats). Yair Lapid, who until recently, along with Gantz, was one of the leaders of Blue and White, will become the leader of the opposition (this is an official position in Israel).

The new government will focus on dealing with the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic (both its health and economic aspects), countering the threat posed by Iran, and preparations for the territorial annexations in the West Bank envisaged under the Trump peace plan. Netanyahu has also promised to counteract a possible investigation by the International Criminal Court into alleged Israeli war crimes committed in Palestinian territories (the West Bank, Gaza and eastern Jerusalem).

The government's swearing in coincided with the launch (24 May) of a criminal trial against Netanyahu on charges of corruption and abuse of power.

Commentary

- The inauguration of the new cabinet brings the political crisis which began in December 2018 to a close. During this period Israel was governed by an interim cabinet, and parliamentary elections were held early three times. The new Netanyahu cabinet, which is the effect of a political compromise between two camps which until recently were each other's main rivals, starts off with an extensive parliamentary base and high public support.
- Given the need to ensure a balance between the coalition members and to satisfy the interests and ambitions of the key politicians, the new government is the largest cabinet

in the country's history (with 35 ministers and 16 deputy ministers). This has been widely criticised in Israel. Its size, dispersed competences and the mechanisms envisaged in the coalition agreement that allow both leaders to block one another's decisions raise concerns among the Israeli public that the cabinet will have difficulty operating effectively. However, it seems that excessive bureaucracy may adversely affect mainly those areas that have no strategic significance because competences in such areas as national security and foreign policy will be in the hands of Netanyahu, Gantz and the narrow circle of their closest aides.

- It appears that the new government will remain stable in the coming months. It will be further strengthened (amongst other things) by the epidemiological crisis and the fact that both leaders are politically invested in the compromise. The coalition's durability will also be supported by a system of legal guarantees covering the coalition agreement. However, the government's future is uncertain in the medium term. Netanyahu and Gantz do not trust each other, and their positions – regardless of the formal provisions – are not equal. Gantz is in fact a new politician and has a weaker and less cohesive political base. In addition to this, Gantz has put his reputation at stake by entering a coalition with Netanyahu, despite having promised his voters he would remove him from power. In turn, Netanyahu is the country's longest serving prime minister, leads the largest political party (Likud) and has on many occasions proven his resourcefulness when it comes to marginalising the competition. Given all this, a significant section of the public do not believe that the rotation of prime ministers scheduled to take place in one and a half years (the most important provision of the coalition agreement) will really happen. It should be expected that tension inside the government will increase as the date of the planned transfer of power moves closer.
- Entering the coalition agreement was a risky move for Gantz. The price he has paid for this includes more than half of the deputies leaving his bloc and many of his supporters severely criticising him. Meanwhile for Netanyahu this move is an unquestioned success. Regardless of a series of challenges he had to face over the past one and a half years (including the withdrawal of an important coalition member, indictment and falling support for Likud) not only did he not allow others to deprive him of his position, he also became prime minister again, with the strongest political mandate since 2009. Furthermore, considering the challenges linked to the epidemiological and economic crises, the slogan of removing Netanyahu from power is no longer as mobilising as it used to be during the last three parliamentary elections. The criminal trial beginning on 24 May will be a political burden for the Israeli prime minister but, firstly, no quick decisions should be expected during this trial and, secondly, Netanyahu is entering it from the strongest position possible.
- As regards the agenda, the greatest novelty in the case of Netanyahu's fifth cabinet is the open promise of territorial annexations in the West Bank. The two leaders have different views on this issue (Gantz wants the annexations to be carried out on a smaller scale and emphasises the significance of the consent of the international community). Nevertheless, this difference was taken into account at the stage of forming the government and is unlikely to become a source of tension. Nor is there any doubt that the motion for 'extending sovereignty' to selected parts of the West Bank will be approved by

the parliament as it would also be supported by opposition parties to achieve the required majority. Regardless of the promises that annexations may be put on the political agenda already in July this year, their scope and precise schedule are still unknown and seem to still be the subject of negations both inside the Israeli elites, and between Israel and the USA. Ambiguous signals have been received from representatives of the Trump administration regarding this issue: some of them appear to grant Israel free rein, others seem to warn against overly hasty decisions, while some seem to urge more decisive action be taken.

- No major changes should be expected in the new Israeli government's foreign policy. It will be characterised by a strategic alliance with the USA, pragmatic (mainly economic) relations with China, tactical and selective co-operation with Russia in the areas of security and regional policy, complicated relations with the EU and its member states, and by efforts to build closer relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (based on shared enmity towards Iran). However, this picture may be seriously complicated by the decision concerning territorial annexations in the West Bank, which will certainly provoke a negative reaction from Brussels and the key EU member states and will seriously complicate the formation of closer relations with the Arab world.