

Netanyahu Re-Elected Prime Minister

With all the ballots counted, it was clear that Benjamin Netanyahu has been re-elected as Israel's Prime Minister for the fourth time. Netanyahu's conservative Likud Party won 30 of the 120 seats in the Knesset. The liberal Zionist Union (formerly Labor Party) won 24 seats, but it was not enough to put their party leader Buji Herzog in office as prime minister.

While there were few surprises with the smaller parties, the most recent pre-election polls had shown Herzog unseating Netanyahu. Even preliminary results on election night had Likud and Zionist Union neck and neck with about 24 seats each, making it unclear who would be designated by the president to form the next government.

But hours later, as the final ballots were counted, there was no question that Likud had won, and that Netanyahu had a groundswell for the formation of a stable rightist, conservative coalition. Gone was the need to rely on center-left factions that had caused Netanyahu so many headaches in the previous government.

Not only is Netanyahu still the Prime Minister, he is poised to establish a far more stable conservative government of right-wing parties. In the coming days President Reuven Rivlin will select the candidate best positioned to form the next government. Given Likud's decisive victory over the left-wing Zionist Union, that person will be Netanyahu. It is likely that he will be able to build a coalition exclusively of right-wing parties.

Likud has won 30 seats, the Jewish Home Party has won 8 seats, and Israel Beiteinu has won 6 seats. The new Kulanu Party has won 10 seats, and its leader Moshe Kahlon is a former Likud leader who is expected to be a willing partner for Netanyahu. That would bring Netanyahu's coalition to 54 of the 61 seats needed.

He could again include the two small leftist parties, but that is unlikely. His other option is to include one or both of the Ultra-Orthodox parties - Shas with 7 seats and the United Torah with 6 seats. Getting these two parties in the coalition would be easy, provided Netanyahu is prepared to offer them the Interior Ministry, plus significant funding for the Orthodox yeshivas, and a compromise about the Ultra-Orthodox males requirement to do military service, like all other Jewish young men.

Whatever formation the new coalition takes, it will have some differences of opinion regarding economic and social issues, but it would see eye to eye on diplomatic and security issues, like Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, or the Palestinian state. In other words, it appears that Netanyahu now has the opportunity to form a strong conservative coalition like he wants, and one that might finally serve a full four-year term.

The European Union called quickly to congratulate Netanyahu for his election victory. The EU message said, "We are committed to re-launching the peace process, as well as to working with the incoming Israeli government on a mutually beneficial relationship." However, it must be noted that Netanyahu stated just before the election that he would not continue the unproductive peace process negotiations, nor would he agree to give half of the Israeli land area to the Palestinians so

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they could have their own separate state on Israeli land.
Published: Wednesday, 25 March 2015 09:06

Hits: 8038

In contrast to the EU's speedy congratulations, US President Obama has yet to comment on Netanyahu's victory. However, Secretary of State John Kerry sent a message to Israel three days after the election. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee commented on Obama's silence, saying that if the Labor Party had won the election, we could have expected a loud "popping of corks of champagne in the White House." There have been palpable tensions between Netanyahu and Obama, which came to a head earlier this month when Netanyahu addressed the US Congress and warned against the nuclear deal being hammered out with Iran, which he said would leave the Islamist regime with nuclear breakout facilities.

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