

Netanyahu formally tasked with forming Israel's new government

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Israeli President Isaac Herzog gives Benjamin Netanyahu the official mandate to form a new government [Abir Sultan/EPA]

Tel Aviv, November 14 (RHC)-- Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's former prime minister, was on Sunday officially tasked with forming a new government, paving the way for his comeback as the head of what is widely expected to be the most right-wing coalition in the country's history. Yet, the 73-year-old veteran politician promised to serve all Israelis, "those who voted for us and those who did not – it is my responsibility".

"I have decided to assign to you, Benjamin Netanyahu, the task of forming a government," President Isaac Herzog told him at a ceremony in Jerusalem. Israel has experienced a period of unprecedented political gridlock that forced five elections in less than four years.

Netanyahu's Likud party and his ultraorthodox and ultranationalist allies came first in the November 1 elections, ending the short-lived, ideologically diverse government that had removed him last year after 12 consecutive years in power. They received a clear majority in the 120-seat parliament.

Netanyahu, who faces corruption allegations in court, will have at least 28 days to build a coalition with his allies – two ultraorthodox Jewish parties and a rising extreme-right alliance called Religious Zionism.

With the horse trading already under way, he will try to quickly wrap up the negotiations. Key portfolios, including those of the finance and defence ministries, could prove to be a sticking point as they have already been publicly demanded by Religious Zionism's leaders.

Herzog noted Netanyahu's ongoing trial: "I am not oblivious, of course, to the fact that there are ongoing legal proceedings against Mr Netanyahu at the Jerusalem District Court, and I do not trivialise this at all." But he made clear that Netanyahu could serve as premier while contesting the allegations.

Netanyahu's next moves will be closely scrutinised as unease mounts in some quarters over his policy plans and the goals of his controversial governing partners. The new government is expected to pass sweeping judicial reforms, a long-held priority of Israel's right. That could include a so-called "override clause" giving parliament the right to overrule the Supreme Court any time it declares legislation to be illegal. The planned reforms would severely weaken the court.

Netanyahu's government may also take control over appointing Supreme Court judges, a role currently performed by a panel of legislators, sitting judges and lawyers. "It is difficult for me to exaggerate the damage and danger" of the proposed reforms, said Suzie Navot, a constitutional law professor at the Israel Democracy Institute think-tank.

Netanyahu returns to power after five elections in less than four years that were all essentially a referendum on his fitness to serve while on trial for corruption. He was toppled last year by a coalition of eight parties that united over their distaste for Netanyahu but ultimately collapsed over infighting.

Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, co-leaders of the Religious Zionism bloc, have publicly demanded control of the public security and defence ministries. Ben-Gvir has been repeatedly convicted for charges of incitement and supporting a terror group. With the police overseeing key holy sites in Jerusalem, his appointment to such a sensitive post could inflame tensions with the Palestinians.

Smotrich, a West Bank Jewish settler who supports annexing parts of the Palestinian territory, is vying for the defence portfolio – the main enforcer of Israel's open-ended occupation of the West Bank.

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