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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Israel to swear in new parliament after election

AFP | Apr 30, 2019, 06.23 PM IST



JERUSALEM: Israel's new parliament will be sworn in Tuesday following April 9 elections that saw Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu win a fifth term, but he has yet to put together a new coalition government.

The Knesset, or parliament, has potentially stormy sessions ahead as it works to resolve key religion and state issues as well as a possible proposal that would shield Netanyahu from prosecution.

The prime minister is facing potential indictment in the months ahead on charges of fraud, bribery and breach of trust.

Netanyahu's Likud won 35 seats out of the Knesset's 120 in the election, the same as his main opponents from the centrist Blue and White alliance, led by ex-military chief Benny Gantz.

But support from smaller right-wing parties allied to Likud led to a majority of 65 parliament members supporting Netanyahu to continue on as premier.

On April 17, President Reuven Rivlin tasked Netanyahu with building a government.

He has 28 days to form a government, with a possible extension of a further two weeks.

His support comes mainly from the nationalist right and the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties.

Among issues likely to be tackled in the incoming parliament is the fierce debate over whether ultra-Orthodox Jews should perform mandatory military service.

The strengthening of the two ultra-Orthodox parties -- to a combined 16 seats from 13 in the outgoing parliament -- increased their clout and their opposition to the draft is central to their demands in the ongoing coalition negotiations.

Disagreement on the issue contributed to Israel holding early elections.

In addition, Netanyahu made a last-minute pledge ahead of the elections to annex settlements in the occupied West Bank, a move that could end remaining hopes for a two-state solution if done on a large scale.

Netanyahu also faces the prospect of becoming the first sitting prime minister to be indicted.

The attorney general has announced he intends to indict him for bribery, fraud and breach of trust pending a hearing.

But Netanyahu would be entitled to remain in office until his trial and any subsequent appeals are over.

One potential member of his coalition has said he wants to propose a law that would automatically shield parliament members from prosecution unless lawmakers act to lift it.

It is unclear whether the idea would advance further.

Netanyahu's outgoing government was considered the most right-wing in Israel's history and his next is expected to be at least as hawkish, if not more so.

A record 49 new members are joining the parliament, 24 of them from the Blue and White, which is expected to lead the opposition.

It has 29 women members, down from 35 in the previous assembly.

A total of 11 parties or alliances are represented.

In the last parliament, the mainly Arab Joint List alliance was the third-largest force at 13 seats.

The alliance splintered into two different factions for this year's vote and finished with 10 seats.