

COALITION CONUNDRUM

Netanyahu struggles to build coalition as clock ticks



Kobi Gideon (GPO)

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has 22 days remaining to build a 61-seat majority government, but ongoing coalition talks have yet to lead to any breakthroughs as the clock ticks.

Countdown: The mandate handed to Netanyahu by President Reuven Rivlin last week expires on May 4. Traditionally, a candidate can request a two-week extension beyond the first deadline, but Rivlin made it clear he is highly unlikely to grant such a request. In his speech awarding the first chance to Netanyahu, Rivlin said he would have preferred to hand the mandate directly to the Knesset immediately, but his hands were tied. If Netanyahu's mandate expires before he can form a government, Rivlin will have to decide if he should hand it to a second candidate, or straight to the Knesset. Once it arrives at the Knesset, a 21-day countdown will begin until a fifth election is automatically triggered.

Bennett battle: While Netanyahu holds talks with potential coalition partners, the anti-Netanyahu bloc is also continuing to conduct quiet negotiations, hoping for a shot at forming the government if and when Netanyahu fails. Yamina head Naftali Bennett, who either side would undoubtedly need on board in order to build a coalition, has met with both Netanyahu and Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid. According to reports, Bennett has sought to solidify a rotation deal for prime minister with both Netanyahu and Lapid. Netanyahu publicly denied such a possibility, while Lapid stated he would welcome the move and allow Bennett to serve first. Shas leader Aryeh Deri said yesterday that he would also demand a rotation as prime minister if Bennett receives one — noting that his party received 9 seats compared to Yamina’s 7. Netanyahu and Bennett reportedly conducted their recent meeting in English, something the pair were known to do when Bennett served as Netanyahu’s chief of staff.

Slim chance: The National Religious Party’s Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, the far-right figures who, along with the haredi parties, are Netanyahu’s only solid electoral allies, both restated their opposition to joining a coalition alongside or supported by the Islamist Ra’am Party. Netanyahu appears to be pinning his hopes for forming a government on convincing both Yamina and Gideon Sa’ar’s New Hope to join him. But Sa’ar has given no indication he would consider such a move and has repeatedly stated he would not sit with Netanyahu. Political analysts seem to agree that a fifth election in less than three years is the most likely outcome — but won’t rule out any last-minute twists. Lapid, meanwhile, departed over the weekend for the United States and will meet with pollster Mark Mellman, according to his fellow Yesh Atid lawmaker Merav Ben-Ari.