

After defeat in key vote, Likud whip concedes Netanyahu won't form government

In inaugural session of Arrangements Committee, Miki Zohar says Likud leader will lead right-wing parties into opposition.



Screen capture from video of Likud MK Miki Zohar chairing a meeting of the Knesset Arrangements Committee, April 19, 2021. (Knesset Channel)

Hours after his Likud party suffered a stinging surprise defeat in a Knesset vote on forming a key committee, the party's faction chief, MK Miki Zohar, said that the party now realizes that it will be heading into the opposition, rather than forming a government.

As he chaired a first meeting of the Arrangements Committee, Zohar said, "We understand and internalize that we are on the way to the opposition."

"[Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu will lead the opposition," he said. "We will go with our heads held high."

Directing his remarks at opposition lawmakers, Zohar added, "Believe me, you won't have an easy time with us."

MK Ze'ev Elkin, a former confidant of Netanyahu who nonetheless left the party ahead of the March elections to join the rival New Hope, which is committed to replacing the prime minister, responded by questioning whether Netanyahu was of the same opinion as Zohar.

"It is interesting to know what they will say at Balfour," he tweeted, referring to the Jerusalem street where the prime minister's official residence is located. "It seems to me that this will not be Miki Zohar's day."

Some Likud figures have suggested to Netanyahu that he already tell President

Reuven Rivlin he is giving up efforts to form a coalition, despite having another 15 days to complete the task, Channel 12 reported.

It was during a Knesset vote earlier in the evening on forming the Arrangements Committee that the ruling Likud suffered defeat after its proposal for the makeup of the committee was rejected in favor of a counter-proposal from the anti-Netanyahu bloc of parties.

As a result, though Zohar chairs the committee, the bloc of parties seeking to replace Netanyahu has more seats than those allied with the prime minister.

The Arrangements Committee, the first Knesset committee to be formed after an election, controls the legislative agenda in the new parliament until a new government is formed. This includes determining what other parliamentary committees will be formed and who will serve on them. With an ongoing political deadlock complicating the formation of a coalition, the influence of the Arrangements Committee could be amplified.

Immediately after the vote to approve its formation, the committee set to work, though it quickly ran into a dispute, as Zohar refused to bring to a vote proposals coming from the anti-Netanyahu bloc.

Zohar also suffered a setback when his suggestion that there be two deputy Knesset speakers was voted down.

Likud's defeat on building the Arrangements Committee came after Ra'am, an Arab Islamist party, voted against its proposal and backed the alternative, suggested by MK Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid party.

Ra'am's cooperation with Lapid came after the party had been courting both Knesset blocs during negotiations to form a government. Netanyahu is hoping to build a government based on outside support from Ra'am, but the idea has been rejected outright by the far-right Religious Zionism party, which has repeatedly said it will not stay in a coalition that relies on cooperation with Arab Israeli parties.

To form a majority in the Knesset, Netanyahu would need to have Religious Zionism and the right-wing Yamina party on board, as well as outside support from Ra'am.

In the wake of Ra'am voting to stop the Likud proposal, Religious Zionism lawmakers remarked that it further strengthened their view that a government cannot in any way be dependent on Ra'am, even for outside support.

Yamina chief Naftali Bennett, who wants to be prime minister himself, has not yet committed to either the pro- or anti-Netanyahu blocs, but has vowed to do everything he can to prevent a fifth round of elections, following four inconclusive votes in the past two years.

With Ra'am openly cooperating with the opposition on such a significant development and said to have received assurances from Lapid that it will be given key legislative positions if he is given the chance to form a government, Netanyahu's hopes of cobbling together a coalition appeared to be fading.

If Netanyahu fails to form a government or returns his mandate to do so, Rivlin can offer the mandate to Lapid, who is next in line in terms of the number of MKs who recommended him for the task, or ask the Knesset to choose another lawmaker.

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