

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

As Bennett dissolves Knesset to save settler law, a new set of challenges await

The decision to seek elections and transition to caretaker status was not much of a surprise after a year of endless fights. Now the battle over the next election round begins

[CARRIE KELLER-LYNN](#) June 21, 2022



Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid hold a joint press conference in the Knesset, on June 20, 2022, announcing the collapse of their coalition government. (Yonatan Sindel/FLASH90)

Although Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's decision to close the chapter on his own government on Monday evening surprised many of his coalition partners, the reasons for his government's demise were clear to all.

Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid – who will replace Bennett as interim premier once the Knesset dissolution finalizes – together led what has been called Israel's most diverse governing coalition ever.

The eclectic mix of eight parties represented every corner of Israel's left, right, center, and Arab voting bases, and though united by a shared goal of blocking Benjamin Netanyahu from another stint as prime minister, the coalition faced deep ideological divides from its first day, just over a year ago.

The alliance made no attempt to bridge the differences, but instead held fast to a principle of avoiding possible political third rails. The strategy worked, for a time, but eventually the weight of divides on issues important to certain lawmakers or factions became too much to bear.

The coalition has most stumbled in events where ideology crosses security. Many of the divides revolved around areas where Yamina's nationalists and security hawks bumped up against Ra'am's conservative Islamists, including riots in the Negev, a law barring Palestinians who marry Israelis from obtaining permanent residency, unrest in Jerusalem, and finally an expiring law that must be renewed to continue extending Israeli law to settlers, apparently the final straw.

The Knesset had until the end of June to renew the so-called settler law before entering into new legal territory with the law lapsing for the first time since enacted in 1967. With the dissolution of the government before its expiration, the settler law will be automatically extended for six months.

Although Bennett cited the settler law as an immediate reason to force his dissolution decision, it was already clear that the government's days were numbered.

The coalition had dropped from its razor-thin majority of 61 lawmakers to 60 in April with the departure of its former whip, Yamina MK Idit Silman. Along the way it temporarily lost the Islamist Ra'am party, as well as an Arab lawmaker from Meretz. While they were ultimately recovered, another MK from Bennett's Yamina party – Nir Orbach – jumped ship last week in protest over the coalition's inability to pass the settler bill. Bennett's tenure closes with a minority coalition of 59 MKs.



Opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu hails the collapse of the Bennett-Lapid coalition, at the Knesset in Jerusalem on June 20, 2022. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Bennett's decision to leave on his own terms tracks with the ex-military commander's style, former Yamina lawmaker Yomtob Kalfon said shortly after the prime minister's dramatic announcement.

"It makes sense, it's very military-like," said Kalfon. He described Bennett's mentality as "I lead', not 'I'm led'."

So where has Bennett led the country now?

Next steps

The government will bring a bill to dissolve the Knesset next week, according to Bennett and Lapid, though it's not out of the question that it will do so sooner. Supported by the government, the bill would only need to pass three readings.

Bringing down the Knesset and calling new elections can happen very quickly, said legislative expert Chen Friedberg of the Israel Democracy Institute.

"It can happen in one day, if the coalition decides upon it," Friedberg said.

Normally, government-supported bills pass their first reading before moving to a committee in preparation for their second and third readings. The latter two are often voted on as a pair, and after the third reading, a bill becomes a law.

A Knesset dispersal bill would go to the Knesset's House Committee, headed by rebel parliamentarian Orbach.

If the Knesset does dissolve next week, elections are expected at the end of October, possibly October 25, or soon after. The final date will be set in the dissolution bill, according to Friedberg.



Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, right, and Foreign Minister Alternative Prime Minister Yair Lapid in the Knesset, Jerusalem on June 20, 2022. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

While there is only a 90-day minimum waiting period between Knesset dissolution and elections, waiting until next week to dissolve the Knesset pushes the minimum window into the Jewish High Holidays. Conflicts between religious holidays and the mandate to hold elections on a Tuesday push the date back to late October or early November, with October 25 being the first possibility.

After dissolution is finalized, the plenum is closed and the government shifts into caretaker status. While some special sessions may be called, in general the Knesset does not meet.

“At the moment that they vote to disperse, the Knesset stops its actions,” Friedberg said.

However, MKs retain their positions until the next Knesset is sworn in.

Opposition's last stand?

Setting next week as a dissolution target strikes a strategic balance between maximizing the time the current government can remain in power, even as caretaker, and heading off attempts by the opposition to slide its own government in as an alternate via a complicated legislative procedure known as a “constructive no-confidence” motion.

Likud has seemingly been attempting to line up enough support for the move, which would obviate the need for elections while returning it to power. While Bennett and Lapid's announcement might kill off Likud's plans, it will have one final shot to submit a motion on Wednesday to swap out Bennett and Lapid's government with one of its own, without elections.

Currently, the opposition constitutes 55 seats in Likud's right-religious bloc, and another six from the majority Arab Joint List party, which will not support a Netanyahu-led government.

Of potential relevance for the Likud-led bloc, however, the government is chock full of former Likud members and allies who it has tried to sway back across the aisle for the six necessary votes to reach 61. Netanyahu, in remarks Monday night hailing the demise of Israel's “worst coalition ever,” did not rule out of the possibility of an alternate government in this Knesset.



Illustrative: Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked at a press conference at Ben Gurion Airport, March 13, 2022. (Roy Alima/Flash90)

MKs within Bennett's Yamina party, including Abir Kara, have recently expressed support for forming a right-wing government from within the existing Knesset. Gideon Sa'ar's New Hope party was reportedly in talks with the Likud earlier this month, though the opposition's refusal to support the settler bill that Sa'ar championed soured those contacts.

Members of both those coalition parties are wary of another election cycle, during which right-wing opponents can hammer them for their associations with Arabs and leftists in the current government, and which could see them fail to garner enough support to re-enter the Knesset.

In the most far-fetched scenario, Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked could also switch sides. If Shaked, who is currently abroad, acts quickly, she can resign her ministerial post and return to the Knesset after 48 hours under the Norwegian rule. This would knock out Yamina MK Shirly Pinto, not seen as a likely renegade, and allow Shaked to lend another vote to an alternative government, should she support one.

Apparently spooked by the possible machinations of Shaked, Netanyahu and others, the coalition seemingly decided late Monday that it would not risk the extra few days to let Shaked return and allow Likud to line up more rebels. Instead, according to Knesset Speaker Mickey Levy's spokesman, legislators are now looking to vote as early as this Wednesday to call curtains on the 24th Knesset.