

International

Zionist parliament dissolves, sets fifth election in less than four years

November vote will in part be a contest between Netanyahu and Lapid

JERUSALEM: Zionist lawmakers dissolved parliament on Thursday, forcing the country's fifth election in less than four years, with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid set to take over as caretaker prime minister at midnight. After the unanimous 92-0 vote, the centrist Lapid embraced outgoing Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, whose year in charge of an unwieldy, eight-party coalition was ultimately undone by its ideological divisions.

Lapid, whose Hungarian-born father survived the Holocaust, went immediately to Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial centre after the parliament vote. "There, I promised my late father that I will always keep Zionist entity strong and capable of defending itself and protecting its children," the 58-year-old said in a statement.

The newly called election set for November 1 marks another sign that Zionist entity remains mired in

reality", said Yohanan Plesner, president of the Zionist Democracy Institute think-tank.

The only solution to such "dysfunction," he said, were "long-over-due electoral and constitutional reforms". The November vote will in part be a contest between Netanyahu and Lapid, a former TV news anchor and celebrity who has surprised many since being dismissed as a lightweight when he entered politics a decade ago.

Lapid was the architect of the Bennett-led motley alliance that took office in June 2021, ending Netanyahu's record 12 consecutive years in power and passing Zionist's first state budget since 2018.

Bennett led a coalition of right-wingers, centrists, doves and Islamists from the Raam faction, which made history by becoming the first Arab party to support an Zionist government since the Jewish state's creation in 1948. Raam party chief Mansour Abbas faced backlash from some Arabs but on Thursday defended his decision to take part in Zionist governance.

"We succeeded in pushing ourselves as a political force," Abbas said, adding that Raam would continue advocating for Arab society, making sure that issues like poor living conditions for his Bedouin constituents, were "on the table rather than underneath it".

Farewell address

The coalition came apart last week after some Arab lawmakers refused to renew a measure that ensures the roughly 475,000 Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank live under Israeli law. They said it marked a de facto endorsement of a 55-year occupation that has forced West Bank Palestinians to live under Zionist entity military rule.

For Bennett, a staunch supporter of settlements, allowing the so-called West Bank law to expire was intolerable. Dissolving parliament before its June 30 expiration temporarily renews the measure.

Bennett has argued that his coalition was successful in its brief tenure and showed ideological rivals can govern together.

"No one should give up their positions, but it is certainly possible and necessary to put aside, for a while, ideological debates and take care of the economy, security and future of the citizens of Zionist entity," he said in his farewell address Wednesday.

Bennett will stay on as alternate prime minister responsible for Iran policy, as world powers take steps to revive stalled talks on the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.

Zionist entity opposes a restoration of the 2015 agreement that gave its arch foe sanctions relief in exchange for limits on its nuclear programme.

Lapid will retain his foreign minister title while serving as Israel's 14th premier. He will find himself under an early microscope, with US President Joe Biden due in Jerusalem in two weeks. — AFP



JERUSALEM: Head of Zionist entity's conservative Islamic Raam party Mansour Abbas embraces Zionist Minister of Foreign Affairs Yair Lapid, following the dissolution of the parliament, in Jerusalem on June 30. — AFP



Era of political gridlock

an unprecedented era of political gridlock, with early opinion polls indicating the results may again be inconclusive.

The religious nationalist Bennett has said he will not contest the vote and is stepping back from politics, tweeting the Hebrew word "Toda" (thank you), after lawmakers sealed his departure from office. He later hosted Lapid for a short handover ceremony.

Hawkish former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has assured that he and his allies — extreme-right nationalists and ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties — will finally rally a majority, following what he described on Thursday as a "failed (coalition) experiment".

"We are the only alternative. A strong, nationalist, responsible government," said Netanyahu, who is on trial over corruption charges he denies.

'Deeply polarised'

Regarded by both allies and critics as a tireless political brawler, Netanyahu was already campaigning Thursday, telling shoppers at a Jerusalem mall that combating rising living costs — which he blamed on Bennett's "bad government" — will be his "first mission" after returning to office.

Zionists being forced to the polls for a fifth time since April 2019 highlighted their "deeply polarised

'No progress made' on Iran nuke talks

DOHA: Indirect talks in Qatar's capital between Iran and the US on reviving a 2015 nuclear deal have concluded with "no progress made", a State Department spokesperson said late Wednesday. The negotiations in Doha were an attempt to reboot long-running European Union-mediated talks on a return to the 2015 agreement between Tehran and world powers.

No time limit was previously announced on the most-recent negotiations, which had been taking place in a Doha hotel with special envoy Robert Malley heading the US delegation. But by Wednesday night, a US State Department spokesperson said the "indirect discussions in Doha have concluded".

"While we are very grateful to the EU for its efforts, we are disappointed that Iran has, yet again, failed to respond positively to the EU's initiative and therefore that no progress was made," the spokesperson told AFP in an email. EU coordinator Enrique Mora had earlier said the parties engaged in "two intense days of proximity talks" in Doha

that had "not yet" yielded the progress the EU team sought.

"We will keep working with even greater urgency to bring back on track a key deal for non-proliferation and regional stability," he said on Twitter earlier in the day, posting a photo of himself meeting with Iran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri.

The comments came after Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said that the talks would last only two days. The parties have "exchanged views and proposals on the remaining issues", he said. An EU source told AFP that the discussions, which come two weeks before US President Joe Biden makes his first official visit to the region, were supposed to last several days.

Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian had said Iran was "serious" about finalising a deal in Doha, but that it wouldn't cross its "red lines". "If the American side has serious intentions and is realistic, an agreement is available at this stage and in this round of negotiations," he was quoted as saying by state news agency IRNA earlier Wednesday.

IRNA has previously described the "red lines" as lifting all sanctions related to the nuclear agreement, creating a mechanism to verify they have been lifted and making sure the US does not withdraw once again from the deal. — AFP

OPEC+ stays the course on...

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The group finally decided at its last meeting in early June to add 648,000 barrels per day to the market in July, up from 432,000 in previous months. But the larger-than-expected boost failed to cool prices. Since Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb 24, the international benchmark, Brent North Sea Crude, has added around 17 percent, while the US benchmark WTI has jumped more than 18 percent.

Analysts have warned that only a recession may be able to bring down prices. "The prices will likely push higher unless the recession fears take the upper hand," said Ipek Ozkardeska, an analyst at

Swissquote Bank. Several OPEC+ members have been failing to meet the output quotas, while Iran and Venezuela - and now also Russia - are blocked by sanctions.

The United Arab Emirates said this week it was close to its oil output ceiling, ahead of a regional visit by US President Joe Biden, who is expected to lobby for increased production. Biden will visit neighboring Saudi Arabia, the world's biggest oil exporter, as part of his tour next month, but analysts doubt it will convince OPEC+ to boost output.

On Monday, at the meeting of the G7 club of industrialized nations in Germany, French President Emmanuel Macron was caught on camera telling Biden details of a conversation with UAE leader Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. According to Macron, Sheikh Mohamed said the UAE was at its "maximum" capacity and Saudi Arabia also faced a limit for raising production. — AFP

Marcos Jr, who appears to be more polite and businesslike than Duterte, was swept to power with the help of a massive social media misinformation campaign. Pro-Marcos groups bombarded Filipinos with fake or misleading posts portraying the family in a positive light while ignoring the brutality and theft of billions of dollars from state coffers during the patriarch's 20-year rule. Crucial to Marcos Jr's success was an alliance with Duterte's daughter Sara, who secured the vice-presidential post with more votes than him, and the backing of rival dynasties.

Many expect Marcos Jr will be less violent and more predictable than the elder Duterte, but activists and clergy fear he could use his victory to entrench himself in power. "Marcos Jr's refusal to recognize the abuses and wrongdoings of the past, in fact lauding the dictatorship as 'golden years', makes him very likely to continue its dark legacy during his term," leftist alliance Bayan warned. Marcos Jr, who previously distanced himself from his father's rule but not criticized it, urged the gathering on Thursday to not look "back in anger or nostalgia".

He has filled most cabinet positions, with a mass swearing-in at the palace Thursday. But the most influential adviser during his six-year term will likely be his wife, Louise, who is widely believed to have run his campaign. Sergio Ortiz-Luis, president of the Employers Confederation of the Philippines, said the country had a "big chance that we can be moving forward and ahead of the pack" under Marcos Jr. "We are very optimistic on the quality of the leadership that we have now," said Ortiz-Luis. — AFP

Salmonella hits biggest...

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plant, which is in Flanders, northwest of Brussels. "Food safety is of the utmost importance for Barry Callebaut and this contamination is quite exceptional. We have a well-defined food safety charter and procedures," the firm said.

Belgium's food safety agency AFSCA has been informed and a spokesman told AFP it had opened an investigation. An AFSCA spokesman said investigators would "gather all the information in order to trace the contamination". The Wieze plant does not make chocolates to be sold directly to consumers, and the firm has no reason yet to believe that any

contaminated goods made by clients have yet made it onto shop shelves.

The scare comes a few weeks after a case of chocolates contaminated with salmonella in the Ferrero factory in Arlon in southern Belgium manufacturing Kinder chocolates. Belgian health authorities said on June 17 that they had given the green light to restart the Italian giant's factory for a three-month test period. Swiss group Barry Callebaut supplies cocoa and chocolate products to many companies in the food industry, including industry giants such as Hershey, Mondelez, Nestle or Unilever.

World number one in the sector, its annual sales amounted to 2.2 million tons during the 2020-2021 financial year. Over the past financial year, the group, which has a head office in Zurich, generated a net profit of 384.5 million Swiss francs (\$402 million) for 7.2 billion francs in turnover. The group employs more than 13,000 people, has more than 60 production sites worldwide. — AFP

Marcos Jr praises rule...

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"So will it be with his son. You will get no excuses from me."

Ahead of the swearing-in, Duterte received Marcos Jr at the riverside Malacanang presidential palace - which the Marcos family fled from into exile 36 years ago. Duterte, 77, wore a mask and a traditional formal shirt, characteristically unbuttoned at the top and with sleeves rolled up, for the meeting with Marcos Jr, who he once described as "weak". The ceremony comes days after the Supreme Court dismissed final attempts to have Marcos Jr disqualified from the election and prevent him taking office.

As rising prices squeeze an economy already ravaged by COVID-19, Marcos Jr has made tackling inflation, boosting growth and ramping up food production his priorities. He has taken the rare step of appointing himself agriculture secretary to lead the overhaul of the problem-plagued sector. Marcos Jr has also pledged to defend the Philippines' rights to the disputed South China Sea, which Beijing claims almost entirely. He promised Thursday that "we will go very far under my watch" - but has offered scant detail on how he will achieve his goals and few hints about his leadership style after largely shunning media interviews.

Russia quits Snake Island...

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farmland and seen Ukraine's ports seized, razed or blockaded - threatening grain importers in Africa with famine. Western powers have accused Putin of using the trapped harvest as a weapon to increase pressure on the international community, and Russia has been accused of stealing grain. On Thursday, a ship carrying 7,000 tons of grain sailed from Ukraine's occupied port of Berdyansk, said the regional leader appointed by the Russian occupation forces.

Evgeny Balitsky, the head of the pro-Moscow administration, said Russia's Black Sea ships "are ensuring the security" of the journey he said, adding that the port had been de-mined. Separately, the Russian defense ministry said its forces are holding more than 6,000 Ukrainian prisoners of war who have been captured since the Feb 24 invasion. The conflict in Ukraine has dominated the NATO summit in Madrid, where the leaders said Russia "is the most significant and direct threat to allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area".

This came as NATO officially invited Sweden and Finland to join the alliance, and US President Joe Biden announced new deployments of US troops, ships and planes to Europe. Biden said the US move was exactly what Russian President Putin "didn't want" - and Moscow, facing fierce resistance from

Ukrainian forces equipped with Western arms, reacted with predictable fury. Putin accused the alliance of seeking to assert its "supremacy", telling journalists in the Turkmenistan capital of Ashgabat that Ukraine and its people are "a means" for NATO to "defend their own interests." "The NATO countries' leaders wish to... assert their supremacy, their imperial ambitions," Putin added.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz dismissed Putin's comments as "ridiculous" and said the Russian leader "has made imperialism the goal of his politics". NATO leaders have funneled billions of dollars of arms to Ukraine and faced a renewed appeal from President Volodymyr Zelensky for more long-range artillery. "Ukraine can count on us for as long as it takes," NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said at the summit, which ends Thursday, as he announced a new strategic overview that focuses on the Moscow threat.

The document, updated for the first time since 2010, warned the alliance "cannot discount the possibility" of an attack on its members. Kuleba welcomed NATO's "clear-eyed stance on Russia". Russian missiles continued to rain down across Ukraine. In the southern city of Mykolaiv rescuers found the bodies of six slain civilians in the rubble of a destroyed building, emergency services said.

The city of Lysychansk in the eastern Donbas region - the current focus of Russia's offensive - is also facing sustained bombardment. "The Russians are throwing almost all of their resources at capturing Lysychansk," Sergiy Gaiday, regional governor of Lugansk, which includes the city, said on Telegram. "It's hard to find a safe spot in the city." — AFP