

Political

update:– Barak calls on Labor party to enter Likud government –
19 March

Key points:

- Labor party Chairman calls on his party to enter government for the sake of the country
- Labor Secretary-General Eitan Cabel MK delays party convention, necessary to approve or reject Barak's proposal
- Benjamin Netanyahu requests two more weeks for coalition negotiations
- Senior Labor party members oppose Barak's call, arguing against joining a right-wing Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu coalition

Latest developments

- The office of Ehud Barak, Chairman of the Israeli Labor Party, issued a statement on Wednesday (18 March), making clear his desire to lead his party into a broad coalition with Likud party leader Benjamin Netanyahu. Arguing that Labor should be in government for the sake of the country, Barak said "most citizens and most Labor voters want to see the party as a leadership partner."
- Responding to those in the party that have campaigned for Labor to go into opposition, Barak said that leaving the country's problems in the hands of a narrow right-wing government would be irresponsible:

"The public's true dream government is a Likud-Kadima-Labor government. Both Tzipi Livni and Netanyahu said before the elections that they would work to forge a unity government... The diplomatic, security, economic and social challenges facing Israel make it imperative for Labor to seriously consider [Netanyahu's invitation]." (18/03/09)

- Israeli President Shimon Peres assigned Likud Leader Benjamin Netanyahu, on 20 February, with the task of forming the next government by Sunday 22 March. Since then, Netanyahu has courted both the large right-wing Knesset bloc, to form a narrow right-wing coalition, as well as Labor and the centrist Kadima party, with the hope of establishing a broad national unity government.
- Due to the limited time left for coalition negotiations, Barak asked Labor Secretary-General Eitan Cabel MK on Wednesday (18 March), to organise a party convention for the following day, in order to approve his decision. Opposing Barak's proposal and arguing that most Labor MKs will oppose him Cabel arranged the convention to take place on Tuesday (24 March), after Netanyahu's deadline for forming a government.
- In response to the statement and the timing of the Labor convention, Netanyahu asked President Peres on Thursday (19 March) to delay his deadline for another two weeks, the maximum period aloud under the Israeli constitutional law. If approved, Netanyahu will have until 5 April to finalise his coalition negotiations.

- According to the Israeli Haaretz newspaper, Netanyahu has offered the Labor party five Ministerial portfolios. These roles include the minister of defense, the agriculture minister, and the minister of industry, trade and labour. In addition, Netanyahu has reportedly offered Labor the role of deputy defense minister and chair of a Knesset committee.
- Barak's position is strongly opposed by many senior members of the party, not least because Kadima is unlikely to join Netanyahu's government and the Likud leader signed a coalition deal on Sunday (15 March), with Avigdor Lieberman, leader of the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party. Both of these factors weaken the potential for Netanyahu's government to be genuinely 'broad' or 'national'.
- In response to the news that Lieberman was likely to become Israel's Foreign Minister, senior Labor MK and out-going Minister of Welfare and Social Services, Isaac Herzog, said that:

"The next government to rise in Israel will be bad for the State, and we will do everything to topple it... Avigdor Lieberman's appointment as foreign minister will be perceived by the world as a very bad appointment and will cause a difficult problem for all our friends." (09/03/09)

- Opposing Barak's position, Labor MK Shelly Yacimovich told Israeli Army Radio on Thursday (19 March) that the party's Socialist-Democratic platform and political and ethical views are contrary to the economic worldview of Prime Minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu and Yisrael Beiteinu Chairman Avigdor Lieberman, adding:

"I think that sitting in a government with Netanyahu, Shas and Israel Beiteinu would not influence the current situation... We can achieve things with Netanyahu without being dragged into his government." (19/03/09)

- The Labor party's legal advisor Yoram Avrahami insisted that the convention, scheduled for Tuesday (24 March), would have to be cancelled since party rules dictate that any party meeting must be arranged with three weeks notice. Avrahami, a supporter of Labor Secretary-General Eitan Cabel MK, said:

"We will not allow anyone to trample the party's constitution and we will maintain [the] set procedure of convening the convention, which takes three weeks... Netanyahu's timetable is not relevant." (19/03/09)

Background

- The Israeli general election on 10 February saw the Labor party finishing fourth, its worst ever showing in Israeli electoral history. Labor won 13 seats down from the 19 seats they won in 2006.
- In the wake of the election, Barak declared that Labor would not be averse to leading from within opposition, saying:

"I suggest not putting us anywhere [in the coalition], it is not a given... As we've always done, we will think over what is best for Labor, and more importantly, what is best for the country. We won't serve in a government that isn't established by the specifications of our path, and we won't hesitate to go to the opposition and serve the people from there." (11/02/09)

- Labor's hopes of joining a new Kadima-led coalition were dashed when the Israeli President chose Netanyahu to lead the next government, deeming Likud to have a better chance of forming a coalition due to the size of the Knesset's right-wing bloc. The centrist Kadima party, which leads the current government with Labor as its coalition partner, won the most seats in the election (28), but was followed closely by the right-wing Likud party (27).
- According to Knesset rules, Barak would need the support of at least one third of his faction (five MKs) to split the party, allowing him to take those MKs with him into Netanyahu's government under the Labor party banner. It is believed that Barak's close associates Binyamin Ben-Eliezer MK, Matan Vilnai MK and Orit Noked MK would be willing to follow him into government. If Barak was able to split the party in this fashion, those MKs that did not join him would no longer be members of the Labor faction, but a new Knesset grouping.
- Kadima has so far refused to join Netanyahu's coalition, with its Chairwoman, Tzipi Livni, insisting that he comes out openly in favour of a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before she will consider entering his government. Livni said on Monday (16 March), that her party's stance in the negotiations has remained unchanged, adding that if she "thought there was a genuine wish to form a real unity government I would explore the matter wholeheartedly."