

Netanyahu government in crisis over drafting orthodox Jews

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The Kadima party has pulled out of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government only two months after joining it, over the Likud leader's refusal to force Israel's orthodox Jews to carry out military or some other form of national service.

With Netanyahu expected to have difficulty pushing through his austerity budget, despite a majority of 66 seats in the 120-member Knesset, it is likely that he will call a general election for next January. The issue of conscription, which is creating confusion and divisions within the working class at the very time when discontent is growing over social inequality and the soaring cost of living, will likely predominate in the run-up to the election.

The decision by Kadima leader Shaul Mofaz reflects bitter political divisions within Israel's ruling elite. Israel is a highly militarised state, spending at least 9 percent of its GDP on defence, higher than other developed countries. Despite possessing the only nuclear arsenal in the Middle East, Israel treats all its neighbours in the region as existential threats. It enforces an illegal occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Syria's Golan Heights, and Gaza, ruling over an Arab population that, with Israel's own Palestinian citizens, will soon outnumber Jewish Israelis—and serves as Washington's policeman in the oil-rich Middle East.

Israel requires young men to serve in the IDF for three years and then at least a month a year until the age of 40. It is the only state in the world to require compulsory military service for young women as well, although they are not required to serve in combat units. Israel has until now provided no alternative to active service and does not recognise conscientious objection for pacifist reasons.

But despite conscription, many Israelis do not serve in the military. Arab Israelis are not enlisted for obvious political reasons, given that the army's main day-to-day function is to suppress the Palestinian population, but Bedouins and Druse do serve.

Under the Tal Law, religious Jews are exempt if they can show that they are attending religious seminaries, while

Orthodox women are exempt altogether. Furthermore, the soaring inequality that pervades Israeli society is reflected in an increasing number of poor and marginalised Israelis deemed “unfit” or “unqualified” for mental or physical reasons. There are also a number of young people who refuse to serve for pacifist reasons or—and this is more prevalent—refuse to serve in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Taken together, this means that only about 50 percent of young people serve in the IDF. For a state as dependent as Israel on military forces grossly disproportionate to the actual population—particularly in the event of a major new war like that threatened against Iran—such a rate of attrition is disastrous. But the small religious parties, which have been able to act as kingmakers in Israel's fractured political system, have opposed any attempts to conscript the ultra-Orthodox.

Kadima, which promotes itself as a “centre right” party, won the largest number of seats in the 2009 general election but, unable to form a coalition, was forced to cede power to Netanyahu's Likud, which went into a coalition with right-wing nationalist and religious forces.

When Netanyahu announced last May that he would be holding an early general election, which Kadima was expected to lose, Mofaz joined Netanyahu's coalition and the elections were cancelled. To aid Kadima in claiming it had secured some concessions, Netanyahu pledged to change the Tal Law, which allows ultra-Orthodox Jews to defer military conscription indefinitely if they are enrolled in religious seminaries. The law, struck down in February by Israel's Supreme Court as unconstitutional, is set to expire at the end of the month.

Netanyahu also promised to reform the electoral system and restart talks with Palestinians, an empty gesture since he refuses to halt settlement construction in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. The Levy Committee appointed by the prime minister has concluded that Israel's presence in the West Bank does not constitute an illegal occupation and that the Fourth Geneva Convention regarding the protection

of the local population by an occupier does not apply. It sees no legal reason to stop Israeli citizens living in the West Bank and recommends the retroactive authorisation of dozens of settlement outposts previously regarded as illegal under Israeli law.

Despite Kadima's claims to want peace with the Palestinians, it has pulled out not over the settlement drive but over demands that will lead to the even greater militarisation of Israeli society.

Following the agreement with Kadima in May, Netanyahu set up a committee chaired by Kadima legislator Yohanan Plesner, which called for at least 80 percent of draft-age Orthodox men to perform military or some sort of "national" service by 2016, with stiff financial penalties for those who evade the draft. This provoked the wrath of the Orthodox community, with thousands taking to the streets in a protest demonstration.

The ultra-Orthodox Jews, known as Haredi Jews, are largely poor, since they do not work. Israel's media have long labelled them as "draft dodgers" and "scroungers" who live off state handouts.

This campaign has served to channel inchoate and unfocused social and political discontent into a conflict based on an alliance among all those supposedly upholding Israel's "secular traditions", thus subordinating the working class to bourgeois forces, while secular and religious parties alike form alliances as necessary to defend the interests of their wealthy patrons.

In Tel Aviv, secular reservists organised a rally attended by about 20,000 people calling for an end to exemptions for Orthodox Jews under the banner, "We are no longer suckers". They insisted that everyone "shared equally in the burden of defending the state". Some threatened that they would refuse to carry out reservist duty if the government failed to extend the draft law.

Yuval Diskin, the former Shin Bet chief, said, "The time has come to end state payment to those who don't take part in the national burden, since we know that it just encourages draft dodging". He added, "Equal conscription is a concern that is shared by right and left and is part of the ethos on which the state was founded. It need[s] to be done wisely in consultation with all parts of society, but it needs to be done resolutely, because there will always be those who oppose it."

Diskin's comments reveal concerns about the prevalence of draft dodging broader than the highly problematic and counter-productive issue of the ultra-orthodox Jews. Indeed, their requirements for separate facilities, including special food and units with no women, have led to the proposals for alternative forms of "national service."

Forcing the religious Jews to serve would set a precedent.

It would enable pressure to be put on the small but increasing number of young people who are evading the draft or reserve duty because of their dislike of the army's suppression of the Palestinians.

Other participants at the rally included former army chief Gabi Ashkenazi, former deputy chief of staff Moshe Kaplinsky, Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai, and former Labour and Histadrut leader Amir Peretz. Kadima supported the rally, although Mofaz was booed and asked to go home.

Some of the leaders of last summer's social protest movement have taken up this reactionary line that substitutes an obligation to do military service for genuine social equality, thus blurring the entirely different interests of the ruling elite, which speaks for Israel's oligarchs, and the broad mass of Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. Furthermore, such a line serves to promote nationalism and patriotism and cuts across attempts by some in the movement to appeal to the Palestinians.

Itzik Shmuli, the Student Union chairman, speaking at the rally, called on the Prime Minister to extend the draft. He equated the call for an "equal draft" with last year's mass social justice protests, arguing that sharing an "equal burden" played a major part in creating a just society—a theme that has become the leitmotif of what remains of the now deeply divided protest movement.

Faced with opposition from the religious parties in his coalition, Netanyahu abandoned the Plesner committee's recommendations and called for a phased introduction of the draft extension.

As well as Kadima, he was also opposed by his secular ultra-rightist coalition partner, Avidgor Lieberman's Israel Beiteinu. The party called for mandatory conscription for all Israelis, including Palestinian Israelis, in a bill that was defeated in the Knesset on Wednesday.

Kadima, whose popularity with the electorate has plummeted, is now riven with divisions and is expected to splinter.

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[21 May 2009]



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