

Polish government strips powers from parliament and constitutional court

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Encouraged by the electoral victory of Donald Trump in the US, the Polish ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) has stepped up its offensive against the country's liberal opposition and its efforts to establish an authoritarian regime.

During the night of 17 December police broke up a blockade of the parliament (Sejm) organised by the opposition. Previously, the liberal opposition had organized protests throughout Poland, mobilising tens of thousands to oppose a new law restricting the access of the media to parliament.

One day earlier, on Friday, 16 December, deputies of the opposition Civic's Platform (PO) and Nowoczesna (Modern) had occupied the plenary hall of the Sejm to protest against the law. The government responded by switching the vote on the 2017 budget to another room, and, according to media reports, excluded both members of the opposition and the media. Thereby the PiS effectively prevented the opposition deputies from voting on the budget, one of the most important rights of the Sejm.

Opposition Sejm deputies still continue to occupy the plenary chamber. The occupation is due to continue until the next scheduled meeting on January 11. The Sejm has now been surrounded with a metal fence and is guarded by policemen. Demonstrations outside the building are forbidden and PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński has accused the opposition of an attempted "coup".

Three days after the Sejm blockade, the PiS, with the support of President Andrzej Duda, stripped the powers of the country's constitutional court in a cloak and dagger operation. On the nights of 19 and 20 of December, it rapidly passed three changes of law, which in effect places the court under government control. The president of the constitutional court is now to be appointed directly by the state president, and Duda immediately appointed PiS supporter Julia Przyslebska as new court president.

The term of office of Andrzej Rzepliński, who was close to the opposition, had expired on 19 December.

At the end of last year, the constitutional court had declared several laws passed by the PiS to be unconstitutional. The government, however, refused to print the judgments, which did not become legally binding under Polish law. Now, the constitutional court is virtually eliminated as an institution independent of the government. The PiS can now pass the constitutional changes announced by the party in 2015 in its electoral program.

The EU has openly placed itself on the side of the liberal opposition in the domestic political debate. After a meeting on 21 December, the EU Commission asked Poland to amend the most recent legislative amendments to the constitutional court within two months. It did so within the framework of the so-called "rule of law" mechanism, which the EU Commission applied against Poland for the first time in its history at the beginning of the year. PiS has already announced that it will not accept the most recent proposals. If it does not meet the new deadline, the EU can theoretically withdraw Poland's voting and veto rights.

The former president of the Commission, José Manuel Barroso, has described this move as a "nuclear option". In the history of the EU, sanctions have never been imposed against a member country. However, such an option appears unlikely because Hungary is likely to use its veto. A decision for sanctions could also quickly lead to Poland quitting the EU, leading in turn to the collapse of the Union.

With its authoritarian offensive, the PiS is reacting to the election of Donald Trump in the US. It regards the election of the right-wing billionaire who draws on far right forces as confirmation of its own domestic policy. At the same time, the election result has exacerbated the dispute over the country's foreign policy orientation.

Polish ruling circles fear that the US government under Trump will distance itself from NATO and seek rapprochement with Russia.

The PiS is responding to growing uncertainty in international relations with authoritarian measures and accelerated military rearmament. The liberal opposition has no real alternative to offer, apart from appeals to privileged sections of the urban middle class and the European Union, which is responsible for enforcing austerity throughout Europe at the expense of the working class.

The PiS's authoritarian measures are highly unpopular, although the government has tried to neutralize working class opposition with some social concessions such as the introduction of a child allowance of 500 Zloty per month (around €125) and a reduction in the retirement age. In polls, 68 percent of the population rejected the law restricting media access to parliament. A majority of Poles also oppose the PiS offensive against the constitutional court. Around 47 percent say the country is heading in the wrong direction, with this figure expected to grow.

Ultimately, however, the liberal opposition is far more afraid of mobilizing the working class than of the authoritarian measures and methods of the PiS. Like the PiS, it emerged from sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the Solidarity trade union movement, which supported capitalist restoration in 1989. The restoration led to a massive impoverishment of the working class, broad layers of the middle class and the rural population. The limited bourgeois democratic rights established in the constitution in 1997 to legitimize capitalist restoration and create a stable framework for bourgeois rule have been almost completely dismantled by the PiS within a year.

On the issue of warfare against Russia, the liberal opposition basically agrees with the government. There are, however, sharp differences as to which imperialist powers Poland should align.

The PiS government is oriented towards a close alliance with the US and UK and the establishment of an alliance of Eastern European states against Russia—the so-called Intermarium. It opposes the attempts of Berlin to convert the EU into a military union, and fears German pre-eminence in Europe. Its authoritarian tendencies, drawing from the example of the Pilsudski regime that ruled between the world wars, are aimed at preparing for war and the violent repression of the working class.

The liberal opposition, on the other hand, argues that an alliance of Eastern European states against Russia is

unfeasible and would bring Poland into conflict with Berlin, which rejects an Intermarium solution. The liberal opposition regards an exclusive orientation to the US and the UK as a threat to Poland's national interests. It therefore wants to establish a close alliance with both the US and the EU and in particular Germany, Poland's most important economic partner.

The election of Donald Trump as the next US president has intensified these differences. The now feared rapprochement between Russia and the US would be a disaster for both camps. The liberal wing of the bourgeoisie, represented by the key figure of EU Council President Donald Tusk, considers it all the more important to work closely with Germany and France and strengthen the EU.

Representatives of the government, on the other hand, have declared their desire to work more closely with the US. The PiS has, in the main, sought to ignore and downplay the threats made by Trump to desert NATO and improve relations with Russia. The Polish bourgeoisie has maintained an orientation towards the US and NATO since 1989. Following the accession of Poland and other Eastern European countries into the Atlantic military alliance, the US has repeatedly tried to play off these countries (“new Europe”) against Berlin and Paris (“old Europe”) in order to counter the growing influence of Germany in the EU. Under the former PO government led by Donald Tusk, who is now a close ally of Chancellor Merkel, Poland developed close political and economic relations with Germany and, to a lesser extent, France.

The threatened break-up of the EU, the growing conflicts between the leading imperialist powers of Europe and the US and the possible change in the course of US foreign policy under Trump now pose a practically insoluble dilemma for the Polish bourgeoisie. As was the case in the 1930s, it is desperately trying to steer between the imperialist powers which are increasingly on the path toward world war.



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