

Parliamentary crisis in Poland deepens amid US troop deployment

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Amid the deployment of 3,500 US troops to eastern Poland, which marks an open escalation of the preparations for war against Russia, the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) is continuing its offensive to undermine the parliament as an institution and build up a dictatorial regime.

Last Thursday, delegates of the liberal opposition parties Civic Platform (PO) and Nowoczesna (Modern) ended their nearly one-month-long sit-in protest in the plenary home of the Polish parliament (Sejm).

Their protest had started on December 16, when tens of thousands of people protested under the leadership of the liberal opposition against a planned bill that would restrict the access of media to parliamentary sessions. Several delegates of the opposition in the Sejm supported the protests by occupying the lectern.

In response, the Marshal of the Sejm, Marek Kuchciński, who is responsible for directing and organising sessions, moved a planned session for the vote on the state budget for 2017 to another hall, with both journalists and opposition delegates banned from the session. This effectively stripped the body of the Sejm of its fundamental right to determine the state budget.

The leadership of the opposition movement, KOD (Committee for the Defence of Democracy) reacted by calling for a blockade of the Sejm, which lasted into the morning hours of December 17, when it was broken up violently by the police. Since then, about a dozen opposition delegates continued their protest in the plenary room. When they announced the end of their protest action, only 6 percent of the population indicated in polls that they would still support it.

While PiS has at least for now withdrawn the bill on limiting the media access to parliamentary sessions, the government has flat-out rejected the demand of the opposition to hold another session for voting on the state budget of 2017. Media reports also suggest that the

minutes of the session held December 16 were falsified in order to make the vote look legitimate.

Jarosław Kaczyński, the head of PiS, ridiculed the opposition's demand for the Marshal of the Sejm to be dismissed and replaced as "irrational, if not cabaret-like". He announced that PiS will consider changing the regulations for conduct in the Sejm, so as to make both a blockade and a sit-in protest impossible in the future. He also declared that criminal charges might be pressed against the delegates involved in the sit-in protest.

Moreover, in an ominous signal of his intention to build up a dictatorial regime, Kaczyński remarked during a speech he held before the Presidential Palace that "the day will come when Poland will once and for all free itself of all that, of the sickness that we see here. And no shouts, no screams, no sirens will change that. Poland will be victorious against its enemies, against the traitors."

The Marshal of the Sejm has moved the next regular session of the parliament to January 25 with no votes on major policy issues scheduled.

The reaction of PiS to the parliamentary crisis makes clear that the party is now determined to press ahead full speed with the buildup of an authoritarian state. After the virtual paralysis of the Constitutional Court as a functioning and independent body, the impending elimination of the Sejm as a more or less functioning body would mean the total abolition of the division of powers in Poland, effectively placing the judiciary and the legislature in the hands of the government.

This marks the temporary culmination of more than a year of the rapid dismantling of bourgeois democratic rights and institutions that began in the fall of 2015. It includes:

- The take-over of the secret services by the government right after the parliamentary elections in 2015;
- The paralysis of the Constitutional Court for about a year and then a rapid reversal of its administration in

December 2016, effectively placing it under government control;

- The institution of government control over state television and radio stations in December 2015, which entailed, in only the first few weeks, the dismissal of over 60 reporters and journalists;

- A law changing the criteria for admission to the police, which ensures that both the head of the police and individual policemen can be dismissed and replaced if their political views and behaviour are deemed incorrect by the government, also in December 2015;

- The placement of the office of the state prosecutor under the supervision of Ministry of Justice in early 2016;

- A new “anti-terrorism” law from the spring of 2016 allowing for the banning of public meetings under conditions of heightened alleged terrorist alert, as well as a massive extension of domestic spying, the expulsion of foreign citizens and detention without trial;

- The creation and arming of a parliamentary militia that heavily draws from far-right forces and will be integrated into the Polish state as part of the preparations for war with Russia and a potential domestic civil war.

In addition, PiS has extended its already close ties to the Catholic Church, culminating in the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the “King of Poland” by President Andrzej Duda and the Polish Bishops in November 2016.

Behind the aggressive moves of PiS against the Sejm lies an increasing nervousness in the Polish bourgeoisie about the prospects of a reversal of US-foreign policy under a Trump administration and the prospect of the eruption of violent class conflicts in Poland and internationally. The conclusion PiS has drawn from the breakdown of the post-war order and the increasing social crisis in Poland and Europe as a whole, is that it has to prepare with whatever means necessary for the waging of war on two fronts: abroad, chiefly and foremost against Russia, and at home against the working class.

The parliamentary crisis in Poland coincides with the arrival of thousands of US troops to the eastern part of the country in what is the first stationing of US troops in Poland since 1989, right at Russia’s doorstep.

The first 2,700 out of the 3,500 troops planned were officially welcomed in a ceremony in the town of Żagań on Saturday by the defence minister. Shortly before that, the Polish senate had approved a plan to increase defence expenditures in 2017 by 3.4 percent, after an increase of 9.3 percent in 2016.

Both the increase in defence expenditures and the deployment of US troops put Poland, which has suffered

tremendously from the past two world wars, at the forefront of a possible military conflict of the US with Russia. Nevertheless, no public debate is taking place on the question of war in Poland, with the liberal opposition welcoming and endorsing both the US troop deployment and the massive increase in defence expenditures.

It is in this context that the political prostration of the liberal opposition in the face of the buildup of an authoritarian police state by PiS needs to be understood.

Remarkably, the elimination of the Sejm as a constitutive political body in Poland has been taken basically as an all but established fact by the liberal opposition media.

In the lead article of the current issue of the liberal *Polityka*, the well-known commentator Rafał Kalukin provided a fairly critical summary of the evolution of the Sejm since 1989 and argued that “the main trump of the opposition has become the ability to block changes in the constitution.” Of course, this “ability” disappears with the elimination of both the Sejm and the Constitutional Court as bodies of influence.

Kalukin concludes his article with a gloomy rhetorical question, basically indicating that nothing can be done about the rise of authoritarian regimes and right-wing politics internationally: “Perhaps the [good] weather for democratic liberals and other legalists is conclusively ending and the world is entering a new epoch?”

The political impotence of the liberal opposition is rooted in its class position. It speaks for a section of the bourgeoisie and the upper-middle class that has tactical disagreements with PiS about the orientation of foreign policy—favouring closer collaboration with German imperialism and the EU. The liberal opposition also fears that the government’s policies will destabilise the country and decrease its significance on the international stage. However, just like PiS, it fears more than anything a mobilisation of the working class against the threat of dictatorship and war and the capitalist system from which they emerge.



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