Netanyahu exploits coronavirus pandemic to build up dictatorial regime in Israel

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21 March 2020

Hundreds of demonstrators protesting against the government's surveillance measures and the closure of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, converged on the capital Jerusalem Thursday, in defiance of a ban on large gatherings imposed because of the spread of the coronavirus.

They accused caretaker Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of using the pandemic to consolidate his own position—he faces charges of bribery, corruption and breach of trust in three separate cases—and establish a dictatorship. Their banners read, "No to dictatorship" and "Democracy in danger." They called Netanyahu the "crime minister."

The police, in an effort to block the protesters' entry into the city, turned cars away, leading to scuffles and five arrests. Opposition leaders accused the police of trying to stifle protests at the behest of an un-elected government acting without the Knesset's authority, accusations the police denied.

The rally's organisers said their aim was "to save Israel's democracy" following Netanyahu's announcement in the early hours of Tuesday morning that the cabinet—not the Knesset—had approved a highly controversial measure that would allow the domestic security service, Shin Bet, to track Israelis' phones to locate where carriers of the coronavirus had been, and then send a text message to everyone who may have been in the vicinity, telling them to self-isolate.

It means that the same technology that Shin Bet and the police have long used to track Palestinian militants will now be used against Israeli civilians as a weapon against the pandemic. It would affect a great many people, not just those infected but those who are in their proximity.

The Adalah legal centre and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) have filed a petition against the government's decision authorising Shin Bet to track Israelis' phones on the grounds that the regulations violate the privacy of the citizens in a disproportionate way. They say, "The usefulness of the draconian measures, obtained after sweeping restrictions on the public have already been imposed, is marginal compared to the serious violation of individual rights and the principles of the democratic regime."

These measures are being imposed in the context of the terminal decay of Israeli democracy, which has collapsed in the face of the three-fold pressures of the decades-long military suppression of the Palestinian people, the rising social inequality within Israel itself, which ranks among the highest in the developed world, and now the health and economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

Netanyahu had fast-tracked the measures through the cabinet, using emergency laws, after the outgoing Knesset intelligence committee, led by former IDF chief of staff, Gabi Ashkenazi, refused to approve the proposal without a full discussion by the committee of the incoming Knesset. Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit approved the cabinet's decision, promising that the information collected would be destroyed after 30 days.

The emergency laws Netanyahu used to give the surveillance measures a veneer of legality were originally passed by the British Mandate government that ruled Palestine from 1918 to 1948. Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, they have been used extensively against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, and only occasionally against individual Israeli citizens, but certainly not in such a wide scale manner as is now proposed.

On Wednesday, the Knesset Speaker and member of Netanyahu's Likud Party Yuli Edelstein refused to convene the Knesset to vote for a new Speaker as required. He also refused to allow the Knesset to vote on setting up parliamentary oversight of the government's surveillance measures, saying he was locking the plenary, at least until next week. While he cited the need for unity talks with the opposition Blue and White bloc and coronavirus regulations that prevented gatherings of more than 100 people, this was widely seen as cover for holding on to his own position and paralysing parliament for as long as possible. His purpose was evidently to delay the selection of his successor, since that would be followed by legislation preventing an incoming indicted prime minister from serving and any

oversight of the government during the most severe political crisis in the state's 72-year history.

The Knesset legal adviser Eyal Yinon ruled Edelstein's closure of the plenary into next week as out of order, while President Rivlin called Edelstein to tell him to reopen parliament. The President's Office said that Rivlin "implored" Edelstein "to ensure ongoing parliamentary activity, even during the coronavirus crisis."

The Blue and White party, for its part, filed a High Court petition against Edelstein's decision to close the Knesset, with Ofer Shelah, a Blue and White Knesset member saying that Netanyahu and Edelstein "are not only trying to destroy Israeli democracy, but also to cause the election results to be disregarded." He added that Edelstein "hijacked" the Knesset by preventing a plenum vote on a new Knesset speaker, knowing there is a majority for replacing him. He said, "We won't let that happen."

Edelstein's closure of the Knesset, less than 48 hours after the new Knesset members were sworn in, is the latest manifestation of Israel's deadlocked political system.

Netanyahu was forced to announce elections in late 2018 after one of his coalition partners, Avigdor Lieberman's nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our Home), quit the government. Since then, following three deadlocked elections in less than a year, he has led—or more precisely dominated—a caretaker government that, unable to set a budget or pass legislation, in effect rules by decree without any effective parliamentary oversight.

After the last election on March 2, President Reuven Rivlin called on the Blue and White's leader, former Israel Defence Forces (IDF) chief of staff Bennie Gantz, to form a government. Despite being nominated by 61 members of the 120-seat Knesset, it is far from certain that Gantz will be able to do so.

Netanyahu, in the meantime, has used the pandemic to press Gantz to join "without hesitations" in forming an "emergency unity government" so that "together we will save tens of thousands of citizens." He made it clear, however, that an emergency unity government would not include the third largest party, the four Arab parties in the Joint List, telling Gantz that "There is no place for supporters of terror, in routine times and during emergency."

His Justice Minister Amir Ohana has declared a state of emergency in the justice system due to the coronavirus outbreak, thereby enabling him to postpone Netanyahu's trial, set for March 17, to May 24.

Netanyahu has exploited the coronavirus to cast himself as the only figure capable of responding to a national emergency. He has used his daily press conferences to sow fear. While introducing a series of sweeping restrictions that are no doubt justified by the threat of the

pandemic—requiring all visitors and citizens returning to the country to self-quarantine for 14 days, closing schools and universities, banning gatherings of more than 100 people and ordering people to stay at home—he is utilizing the state of emergency to consolidate his dictatorial grip over the Israeli state apparatus.

On Friday, the cabinet imposed further restrictions—again bypassing parliamentary oversight by using state emergency regulations—making the restrictions imposed earlier in the week legally binding and enforceable. It ordered Israelis not to leave their homes or visit parks and beaches, other than for food, medicine, medical care and essential work.

The health authorities confirmed 705 COVID-19 cases, of which at least 10 are in serious condition. Two ministers and two legislators are in quarantine after being in contact with someone who tested positive for the coronavirus. In the West Bank, there are 47 confirmed cases

The health care system, neglected for years, has been the victim of repeated budget cuts, as Israel's war machine took priority over everything, including a growing population, resulting in a service that was already on the point of collapse. It faces the current crisis totally unprepared, with serious shortages of necessary medical equipment to fight the outbreak. The staff at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv wrote to the hospital administrator saying that they did not feel properly protected from the coronavirus outbreak and they were "beginning to fear for our health."

Netanyahu, as befits the leader of a garrison state, promptly called on Mossad, Israel's spy agency, to use its web of secret contacts around the world, including Arab and Muslim countries that were better supplied but with which Israel has no diplomatic relations, to find relevant medical supplies. Mossad announced that it had bought 100,000 test kits, only to find they were the wrong ones.