

Israel's Knesset speaker resigns in order to defend Netanyahu

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Knesset Speaker and member of caretaker Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party Yuli Edelstein resigned Wednesday morning. This thoroughly undemocratic manoeuvre comes in the wake of Monday's High Court ruling that he must allow a vote on his replacement.

The opposition Blue and White Party, led by Bennie Gantz, had petitioned the High Court for a ruling, following Edelstein's refusal to convene the Knesset, Israel's parliament, to choose a new speaker.

President Reuven Rivlin nominated Gantz to form a government following the third inconclusive election in less than a year. After receiving a bare majority of the 120-seat Knesset votes, he has rebuffed Netanyahu's attempt to form a "national emergency government" under his leadership. It is very unlikely that Gantz can form a government because two members of his own party refuse to form one dependent upon the support of the third largest bloc in the Knesset, the Arab Joint List.

Instead he has, with the support of Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Is Our Home), sought to take over the speaker's office, having won the leadership of several key Knesset committees for his own party and its allies, including the Arab Joint List. His aim is to use his bloc's control of the parliamentary process to thwart Netanyahu's attempt to secure his political survival by short-circuiting the Knesset and using the coronavirus crisis to establish a dictatorial regime under his leadership.

Gantz and his allies have few substantive political differences with Netanyahu and his far-right allies. He said, "The proper functioning of democracy does not limit the [Netanyahu's interim] government's actions, rather it gives them validity. As long as these difficult processes are handled properly, we will vote in their favour and give our full support, even if it hurts us

politically."

Now that the Knesset committees have been established, the "special means" that the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency, plans on using to trace people who had been in contact with coronavirus patients via their cell phones can go ahead. Last week, the High Court ruled, in response to a petition filed by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Arab minority rights group Adalah and attorney Shahar Ben-Meir, that if by noon Tuesday the relevant Knesset committees were not established to oversee these surveillance measures, long used against the Palestinians in the occupied territories without oversight, they had to stop. It also ruled that the police were not allowed to use digital surveillance until further notice.

In announcing his resignation, which comes into effect after 48 hours, Edelstein said the High Court's decision "isn't based on the law, but on a radical unilateral interpretation" and accused the court of undercutting "the foundations of democracy."

He declared, "The High Court's decision contradicts the Knesset protocols and is destroying the Knesset's functionality and constitutes a blatant and vile meddling of the judicial system in matters which are under the purview of the legislature. This decision causes unprecedented damage to the Knesset and the people's sovereignty."

He added that his resignation meant that the Knesset—in accordance with procedural rules—would not be able to convene for a vote on a new speaker before Monday.

Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit insisted that Edelstein must obey the court's decision and hold a vote for his replacement. But Eyal Yinon, the Knesset's legal advisor, said that the Knesset could not

convene before Monday without special instructions from the High Court. He added that the interim speaker, Labour Party leader Amir Peretz, who is allied with the Blue and White Party, could only begin his term on Friday morning.

Edelstein's resignation has stymied parliament and bought time for Netanyahu and Likud. It serves to reduce the amount of time that Gantz of the opposition Blue and White Party has to pass legislation preventing Netanyahu from serving as prime minister while under indictment for corruption, bribery and breach of trust before Gantz's mandate to form a government expires in April.

It also signals open war on the part of Likud and its far-right allies against the judiciary. Netanyahu has long denounced his prosecution for bribery and corruption as an "attempted coup" aimed at overturning his premiership. His aim is to incite his far-right supporters and encourage them to take to the streets.

Following Edelstein's resignation, a convoy of hundreds of cars and around 1,000 demonstrators travelled to the Knesset to demand the election of a new speaker today. The organisers of the "Black Flag" protest said, "This is not just the test of Israel's leaders, but also of the willingness of Israelis to fight for democracy in a time of crisis." As in earlier demonstrations last week and on Monday, the police tried to prevent them from protesting in front of the Knesset.

On Saturday, more than half a million people watched a virtual protest broadcast over Facebook opposing Netanyahu's imposition of strict coronavirus regulations, including permitting Israeli security services to track the phones of coronavirus patients, as well as his attempts to cling onto power. Speakers at the online event included former Mossad chief Efraim Halevy, former Shin Bet head Yuval Diskin and former Attorney General and Supreme Court Vice President Elyakim Rubinstein. Some 65,000 clicked "attending" on Facebook, while 597,000 viewed the live broadcast.

This growing constitutional crisis takes place against the backdrop of social and economic tensions that have escalated in the wake of the coronavirus crisis. There are 2,369 confirmed cases, with 39 people in serious condition. Five people have died.

On Wednesday, teachers returned to work after a near-week-long strike. The government had ordered the

schools to close and teachers to deliver online lessons from March 13. After four days of remote instruction, the Teachers' Union announced that their members would stop work because the Finance Ministry had refused to pay them in full for their remote working days, claiming that many teachers, particularly in preschool, were not really working. The government has now agreed to pay them in full and extend the school year by the number of days lost.

Some 573,000 workers have lost their jobs over the past few weeks due to the stay-at-home measures, shuttered businesses and restrictions taken to control the spread of the virus, under conditions where Israel's health care system is ill-equipped to cope.

The unemployment rate has soared to 17.6 percent, up from 3.6 percent. This is set to increase as Netanyahu has announced new restrictions banning all except essential workers from moving more than 100 metres from their homes and closing all places of worship. He also indicated that his caretaker government is set to impose a total lockdown, presumably with military and police patrols in the streets, if the measures taken thus far fail to stem the tide, saying yesterday in his daily televised broadcast, "It's a matter of a few days."

Israel's central bank has stepped in to buy \$13.4 billion in government bonds in a desperate effort to support the country's declining economy. This follows Netanyahu's announcement of a \$2.8 billion economic package to shore up Israel's corporations. While \$2.2 billion would go to businesses and an unspecified amount to the aviation industry, just \$281 million would go to the health system and a similar amount to stem the spread of the virus. He said that any business hit by the virus could request money from the fund.

In another move aimed at helping business and at the request of the Manufacturers' Association of Israel, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Ophir Akunis has issued a general work permit that extends the legal maximum working day to 14 hours for up to 60 days.



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