

Israel: Gantz agrees to national emergency government with Netanyahu

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On Monday, after weeks of stalled talks, Bennie Gantz, leader of the opposition Blue and White bloc, signed up to a “national emergency government” headed by indicted criminal Benjamin Netanyahu.

The decision of the former Israel Defence Forces (IDF) chief of staff to join the xenophobic, ultra-nationalistic and expansionist government Netanyahu has dominated for the last 11 years, signifies that the dictatorial regime imposed for decades on the Palestinian working class will now be extended to the Israeli working class.

Far from protecting the population from the devastating health and economic effects of the deadly coronavirus that has caused a catastrophic collapse of Israel’s economy—the new government’s ostensible brief—its real purpose is to protect the wealth of Israel’s corporate and financial elite, suppress social unrest in Israel and Palestine and drive down wages and living conditions in an untrammelled pursuit of profit.

Gantz was upfront about the undemocratic nature of the deal, saying, “We have prevented a fourth election.” Despite campaigning in three inconclusive general elections in less than a year, vowing never to serve under him and pledging to preserve the rule of law, Gantz’s unity deal keeps Netanyahu in power and shields him from justice, while busting up his own coalition bloc.

The new unity government is set to last three years, with Netanyahu serving as premier and Gantz as defence minister and deputy prime minister for 18 months, at which point Gantz will become prime minister and Netanyahu his deputy.

The coalition will introduce a law enabling Netanyahu to serve as deputy prime minister despite being charged, which means that Netanyahu, who is due to stand trial on charges of bribery, fraud and

breach of trust next month, will continue to occupy leading positions and an official residence even as he conducts his legal defence. He will be able to veto any senior judicial nomination—including attorney-general—which gives him the power to control the judiciary. Gantz has also agreed that if the Supreme Court disqualifies Netanyahu from serving as prime minister or as deputy prime minister because of the charges against him, new elections will be held, under conditions where his own bloc has split.

Netanyahu has bought the support of his coalition partners by enlarging the cabinet to 36, giving equal seats to his own Likud-aligned bloc and what remains of Gantz’s Blue and White bloc, now dubbed the White bloc.

Netanyahu has agreed to give the justice portfolio to Avi Nissenkorn from Gantz’s party. Gabi Ashkenazi, another former IDF chief of staff, will become foreign minister. This means that the two external posts, foreign and defence affairs, go to military men, who are deemed more politically acceptable to Israel’s backers in the US and European capitals.

Such is the right-wing nature of Gantz’s bloc that Orli Levy-Abekasis, who ran on a joint ticket with the so-called left parties Meretz and Labour, will serve as a Likud minister, while Labour Party leader Amir Peretz will become the Economy Minister and Itzik Shmuli, one of the leaders of the 2011 anti-government protests, taking over the welfare portfolio.

Netanyahu and Gantz will jointly head a special “coronavirus-emergency forum.” One of Gantz’s 18 cabinet seats will go to an Arab minister (not party member).

In an important concession to Netanyahu’s fascistic partners, Gantz has agreed to legislation to be introduced by July authorizing Israeli’s sovereignty

and annexation of Palestinian land it has illegally occupied since the 1967 war, following US President Donald Trump's "deal of the century."

Gantz's capitulation to Netanyahu followed his inability to form a government under his own leadership without the support of the third largest party, the Arab Joint List, an anathema to Israel's political establishment and his potential allies, who whipped up a ferocious media campaign, branding the Arab legislators as "terrorists in suits." New to politics and differing little politically from Netanyahu, his shift was always in the cards.

His move, signaled a month ago, split the Blue and White bloc, with Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid faction and Moshe Ya'alon of the Telem faction, both of whom have served in Netanyahu's governments, refusing to join a national emergency government.

This political chicanery takes place amidst the most severe economic crisis Israel has ever faced. With a healthcare system ravaged by decades of privatization and cuts and in no position to cope with the pandemic, Netanyahu moved early to impose stay at home orders, shutter schools, universities and non-essential business and close its borders. He offered loans and grants to businesses.

As of April 21, there are nearly 14,000 confirmed cases and 181 deaths, although these are unlikely to be the full toll. As cases mounted among the ultra-orthodox, whose leaders refused to adhere to the social distancing restrictions, on April 2, the government declared Bnei Brak and several ultra-orthodox neighbourhoods in Jerusalem "restricted zones."

In anticipation of social unrest, Netanyahu has authorised widespread surveillance powers—routinely used against the Palestinians in the occupied territories—to trace via their cell phones Israeli citizens, who have been in contact with coronavirus patients. Such powers for Shin Bet, Israel's domestic spy agency, have now become part and parcel of the state's surveillance apparatus.

The closures have taken a devastating toll on social and economic life, all but killing Israel's vital tourism and hospitality sector and leading El Al Airlines to seek government aid. Some 26 percent of workers are now jobless, up from 3.6 percent in February. Nearly 40 percent of Tel Aviv's tenants (46 percent of all the city's residents rent their home) are unable to pay next

month's rent, with another 30 percent saying that within a few months they too will not be able to pay.

On Sunday, in the latest of several similar protests, hundreds of self-employed workers demonstrated outside the Knesset and in several locations throughout the country, protesting the lack of social assistance from the government. One furious protestor told *Channel 12* news: "We voted for you. You were chosen as one who knows how to manage wars. In the coronavirus war you have failed! ... You need to get up and get out!"

On the same day in Tel Aviv, several thousand people wearing face masks and waving black flags rallied in Tel Aviv under the banner of "Save the Democracy," calling on Blue and White not to join Netanyahu's coalition government. One placard read, "Let democracy win." Some had written "Minister of Crime" on their masks, in reference to Netanyahu's trial for corruption.

The situation is even more devastating in the occupied Palestinian territories, where, as of Monday, there were 449 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and three deaths. The Palestinian Authority, which runs parts of the West Bank with around 200 intensive care beds with ventilators, has estimated it needs \$120 million in aid to cope with the coronavirus. Gaza, whose resources have been decimated by Israel's 13-year-long siege, has only 87 adult intensive care beds with ventilators for its 2 million people.

Official unemployment is at least 17 percent in the West Bank and 47 percent in Gaza, where three quarters of the population are already dependent upon humanitarian aid. Even if the closures contain the spread of the pandemic, the economic impact is set to cause mass starvation.



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