Netanyahu acquires dictatorial powers citing Israel's upsurge in COVID-19 cases

Jean Shaoul
11 July 2020

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is responding to the collapse of Israel's economy and a resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic with a turn to dictatorial measures against the Israeli and Palestinian working class.

Netanyahu admitted Friday that the country was once again in the grip of a "major outbreak." He introduced a controversial law—passed shortly after midnight on Tuesday by a 29 to 24 majority—giving himself and the cabinet emergency powers to impose pandemic restrictions for up to a week before lawmakers can discuss, amend or cancel them.

He justified this blatant erosion of the Knesset's control over the government saying that debating proposed laws delays the implementation of governmental decisions. He declared, "The legal rules restrict us, it's simply unbelievable to pass everything through legislation."

Netanyahu's deputy and Minister of Defence Benny Gantz approved the call-up of an additional 2,000 reservists for the rest of the month, in addition to the 750 reservists previously approved, to help the government's response to the pandemic.

Another new law enables the Health Ministry to work with Israel's domestic spy agency Shin Bet to use its tracking system, employed against Palestinians suspected of "terrorism," to identify people who had contact with those infected with the coronavirus and order them to quarantine. So flawed is the system that gives Shin Bet legal access to the cell phones of all its citizens that hundreds of the tens of thousands of people contacted and told to quarantine said they were at home at the time and had no contact with anyone. People have taken to going out without their cell phones to avoid being caught by the tracking system.

Netanyahu also gave the green light to his far-right supporters to initiate a vote in the Knesset to set up a commission to investigate Supreme Court judges he has long accused of carrying out a vendetta against him, encouraging his own Likud Party to support it. Gantz's Blue and White Party had called the move "a declaration of war on democracy." In the event, Netanyahu absented himself from the vote, which failed to win a majority.

These measures follow on from Netanyahu's efforts to neuter the media and social media to maintain his grip on government. He has filed numerous complaints with the police about alleged threats and incitement to violence against him and his family, some of which he claims are "are clearly affiliated with the radical left."

Netanyahu has been indicted on serious charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases that all involve attempts to secure a suitably pliant and obsequious media. The second hearing takes place on July 19. It is expected that his lawyers will ask for a delay after the State Comptroller's Office rejected Netanyahu's requests for permission to accept donations from wealthy benefactors for his legal expenses and instructed him to return funds already received, prompting his lawyer Micha Fettman to quit his defence team.

The health authorities announced that the number of active coronavirus cases had exceeded 15,000 for the first time since the start of the pandemic—standing at 17,302 on Friday. There were 1,335 new cases reported on Wednesday, 1,268 on Thursday and 1,441 on Friday in contrast to the numbers during most of May, when new cases dropped to the low double digits. Some 46,000 people are in quarantine, 130 people are in a serious condition, up from 45 two weeks ago, and 39 people are on ventilators. The number of deaths has risen to 351.

The ban on visitors imposed in March remains in place, while any residents returning from abroad must quarantine for two weeks on their return, so this surge is the result of local transmission.

In the West Bank, there are 5,829 active cases, while 25 people have died. In the Gaza Strip, 72 people have been diagnosed with the virus and one person has died. President Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority has extended the lockdown of the entire West Bank.

Gantz is in quarantine after coming into contact with a confirmed coronavirus carrier, as is Rafi Peretz, the Minister for Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage, Public Security Minister Amir Ohana, one of Netanyahu's key cronies in his war on the judiciary, and Aviv Kohavi, Israel's military chief, and other senior officers.

Netanyahu had announced a return to work at the end of April, as the cost of the closures reached $285 million a day, in a bid to ensure a continuing flow of profits to Israel's corporate and financial elite. He declared "victory" over the pandemic and encouraged people to go out and "enjoy yourselves." Having guaranteed a resurgence of the disease, he now blames the public for the surge, saying they should have worn masks in public.

His remarks have led to a massive increase in police enforcement of mask wearing, including fines, arrests and detention, prompting a spike in violent conflicts between police and the public and complaints against the police for using unnecessary force. The police are also enforcing the quarantining of tens of thousands of people.

Professor Siegal Sadetzki, the leading epidemiologist heading the coronavirus response and director of the Health Ministry's Public Health Services, resigned Tuesday. She said the government ignored her warnings, reopening the country too quickly, and refused to listen to advice to address the rising number of infections already apparent more than a month ago.

Sadetzki posted a nine-page critique on Facebook, describing the government's chaotic and ineffective approach and saying it had "lost its bearings." Sadetzki wrote, "The achievements in dealing with the first wave [of infections] were cancelled out by the broad and swift opening of the economy." She blamed the recent surge on the reopening of schools in May and wedding venues in June, allowed to host up to 250 guests.

Professor Eli Waxman, who heads the panel of experts advising Israel's National Security Council on the pandemic, said Israel faced the most dramatic crisis in its history. This is not just a health care crisis, but an economic, social and political crisis.

More than five weeks after the infection rate clearly began to rise again, the cabinet has reluctantly approved new restrictions. These include closing bars, clubs, banquet halls, gyms, public swimming pools, banning cultural events, limiting the number of people allowed on buses, in restaurants and synagogues and hiking fines for people not wearing masks in public. It is discussing whether to impose lockdowns in neighbourhoods or towns with a high infection rate and the measures schools must take when they reopen in September after the summer break.

Under conditions where Netanyahu's government has gutted public services and the social safety net and put in place few measures to protect the health, safety and economic well-being of Israeli and Palestinian workers—including 150,000 families who are short of food, people unable to pay their rent and facing eviction, and the tens of thousands of people isolated and alone—this is tantamount to premeditated murder as he allows the pandemic to spin out of control.

Netanyahu is facing growing anger and criticism over his handling of the economic fallout of the pandemic, with polls indicating only 38 percent of Israelis trusted the government's handling of the crisis. More than 800,000 workers are still unemployed, 21 percent of the workforce. In the West Bank, unemployment has risen from 25 percent to 40 percent.

A mass demonstration has been called for Saturday night in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square against the lack of a social safety net for workers and delays in receiving the limited funds promised. It follows last Saturday's rallies by thousands across the country, organised by the Black Flag movement, demanding Netanyahu's resignation in the wake of the surge in coronavirus cases, the government's response and its plans to annex parts of the West Bank.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact