Israel becomes first country to impose second national COVID-19 lockdown

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On Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud-Blue and White coalition approved a full national lockdown to start on Friday morning, just before the Jewish New Year. It is the first government in the world to impose a second national lockdown.

The government put in place tight restrictions in early March. But in late April, as the infection rate began to fall, Netanyahu announced the phased reopening of schools, workplaces, restaurants, bars, clubs, swimming pools and hotels in the interest of corporate profits. He did so without putting in place any measures to guard against or deal with a second wave, despite recommendations from a team of experts, headed by Professor Eli Waxman from the Weizman Institute of Science.

His team recommended that the government reconsider its decision to restart the economy if the daily number of infections rose above 200, which the government ignored.

Within days of the government lifting restrictions on schools' class sizes, there was a resurgence of the virus. In July, Siegal Sadetzki, Israel's director of public health services, resigned, saying that insufficient safety precautions in schools, as well as large gatherings like weddings, had fueled a "significant portion" of second-wave infections.

Seven months into the crisis, it is still difficult to gain access to testing or get speedy results. After months of claiming it had a contact-tracing system in place, the health ministry handed over responsibility to the army which is now appealing for help from private companies and saying it will not be ready until November at the earliest.

Sunday's decision came amid a soaring infection rate. Israel now tops the world rankings in the number of new COVID-19 cases per capita, with 157,000 confirmed cases—between 3,000 to 4,000 new cases are being recorded every day—and 1,136 deaths in a country of 9 million people. The vast majority of cases have occurred since May when Netanyahu famously told people that the lockdown was over, and people should "go out and have a good time."

In the West Bank, 35,663 cases have been confirmed along with 214 deaths. This includes 8,550 cases in East Jerusalem, while the Hebron governorate has been the hardest hit. The Palestinian Authority has imposed lockdowns on badly-affected areas and a ban on public gatherings including weddings and graduation parties. In Gaza, 1,631 cases have been reported and 11 deaths. The first cases of community transmission were recorded on August 24, and since then the authorities have imposed a strict lockdown.

During the first phase of the lockdown, scheduled to last at least three weeks, people are not allowed to go more than 500 metres from their homes. Schools and non-essential workplaces, businesses and organisations will close. Restaurants will be open for delivery or takeout only and public transport will be reduced. Gatherings are limited to 10 people indoors and 20 people outdoors, severely limiting traditional family gatherings and religious services during the Jewish holy days.

These regulations are based on a new coronavirus law authorising the cabinet to issue restrictions, including limitations on the number of people at demonstrations and the distance between protesters that will curb the weekly anti-Netanyahu protests. The police are preparing to enforce the lockdown policy, even as voices from several groups have announced on social media they will not follow restrictions. Police plans permit the forceful dispersal of gatherings, including entering synagogues if necessary, with large numbers of officers from patrol, riot police and Border Police units.

Such are the political tensions within the ruling coalition over the government's budget—now postponed until the end of November—that Sunday's cabinet meeting was the first in a month.

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The coronavirus cabinet committee had recommended a national lockdown—reportedly with the support of Netanyahu, Health Minister Yuli Edelstein and coronavirus coordinator Professor Ronni Gamzu—in large part because of warnings that the hospitals, underfunded for decades, would soon be overwhelmed by the rising number of patients. Yesterday, the Western Galilee Hospital in Nahariya became the first hospital to announce that it was unable to accept any more coronavirus patients.

Ten days ago, as the number of confirmed cases rose, the Netanyahu government ordered a week of overnight curfews and school closures to take effect from last Tuesday in 40 "red" areas with the highest infection rates. This was a capitulation to the religious ultra-Orthodox parties upon whom he is dependent, and effectively neutered Gamzu's plans.

Gamzu had called for a full lockdown, including the closure of non-essential workplaces and schools, in the 40 worst affected towns and cities, predominantly religious and Arab, Bedouin and Druze communities. The mayors of four of the affected towns had warned Netanyahu that they would not cooperate with authorities if the lockdowns were imposed. The Health Ministry also announced that the 3,000 Hasidic pilgrims returning from Uman in the Ukraine after the Jewish New Year will not have to quarantine in isolation hotels but will be allowed to self-isolate at home.

Netanyahu, facing the prospect of years in jail if found guilty of fraud, bribery and breach of trust in three separate cases, will do anything to maintain his support base and keep himself in power while he manoeuvres to avoid conviction. This extends to provoking an all-out conflict with the judiciary, which he has accused of launching a "left-wing coup" to unseat him.

As infections continued to mount, around 120 doctors and scientists wrote an open letter urging the government not to impose a general lockdown, but instead adopt the "Swedish model" of herd immunity. Some were even invited to give evidence to the Knesset's coronavirus committee. Another group of 150 doctors and scientists vehemently opposed them for encouraging widespread infection, but the open letter served the government's objectives in challenging the scientific recommendations and questioning the acceptance of lockdowns.

The proposal for a second national lockdown met furious resistance from the ultra-Orthodox religious communities, businesses, and the Histadrut trade union federation. Some 85,500 businesses are expected to close this year, compared with 40,000 in a normal year. At least 21 percent of workers are unemployed, a figure set to increase. With businesses claiming that the lockdown would cost them $2 billion and threatening non-compliance, Netanyahu told his finance minister to come up with a new economic package to assist them, adding to the record high budget deficit that is nearly triple that of a year ago.

Yaakov Litzman, chairman of the United Torah Judaism party, the construction and housing minister and a Netanyahu ally, resigned from government in protest over the expected lockdown Sunday, saying that it would "prevent hundreds of thousands of Jews, of all sectors, from praying in synagogues."

Even the timing of the lockdown was adjusted to meet Netanyahu's demands. The postponement until Friday enables him to fly to Washington for Tuesday's signing of the Israel-United Arab Emirates normalization agreement, now slated to include Bahrain as well, and to posture as a world statesman.

Both the Orthodox community, which has insisted on keeping its places of worship, schools and religious seminaries open, and Arab Israelis, who have held traditional large-scale wedding celebrations, have been blamed for the spread of the disease. But this is hardly surprising. Netanyahu has based his coalition on incitement against Israel's Arab citizens and the cultivation of every form of backwardness among his own far-right and religious support base, guaranteeing the ultra-Orthodox rabbis autonomy to keep their schools free of a modern science-based curriculum.

The continued growth of religious ideology, like its counterparts in other countries, the cultivation of divisions between Israel's diverse communities and the economic, social and healthcare crisis now engulfing Israel-Palestine are the price paid by the working class for the betrayals of their old political leaderships. This can only be overcome by the Israeli and Palestinian working class uniting with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Middle East on the basis of a conscious, revolutionary and socialist programme.

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