

Israel's growing anti-Netanyahu protests face increasing right-wing and police attacks

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Protests demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have resumed across Israel.

Ten thousand people took to the streets of Jerusalem last Saturday, along with thousands in Tel Aviv and across other towns and cities. Wearing masks, they held handwritten signs, Israeli flags, black flags, drums and plastic horns, and chanted “Bibi [Netanyahu’s nickname] go home.” Another slogan read, “You are messing with the wrong generation,” indicating the new layers—the millennials—that had joined the protests.

There have even been small protests in settlements in the occupied West Bank.

The renewed rallies follow the lifting of the ban on people demonstrating more than 1km from their homes during Israel’s second phase of lockdown restrictions. This blatantly anti-democratic measure was in marked contrast to the leniency granted to large gatherings of the prime minister’s ultra-Orthodox supporters.

Netanyahu imposed the ban with the support of his so-called “centre left” coalition partner, the Blue and White Party, led by Benny Gantz. After fighting three elections opposing a Netanyahu-led government, Gantz now acts as his political bodyguard.

While the regulations were in effect, more than 100,000 people rallied near their homes at over 1,000 designated points across the country in a run of twice weekly protests. The demonstrators opposed Netanyahu’s continued premiership in light of a series of scandals. He has been indicted on serious charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases over control of the media and is notorious for his lavish lifestyle—courtesy of his stock dealings and expensive presents from businessmen. Now however, opposition is growing to his botched handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the economy. Only 27 percent of the population believe he has managed the health crisis effectively.

Netanyahu’s government lifted an earlier lockdown

without adequate safety precautions and in defiance of recommendations from the country’s health experts.

Cases soon began to soar, leading at one point to the highest per capita rate of infections in the world and a doubling of the number of deaths over a four-week period—2,291 people have now died. A second four-week lockdown had to be imposed at the start of the Jewish holy days.

Even before the pandemic, 26 percent of households, including 841,000 children, were living in poverty or near poverty. Unemployment has now risen to 21 percent and the economy is expected to contract by 6 percent in 2020, the first annual contraction in Israel’s history.

Netanyahu has denied all accusations of personal corruption and wrongdoing, calling it a frame-up, accusing the judicial system of mounting a coup against him at the behest of “leftists,” and making several attempts to neuter the judiciary. Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, a former close aide of Netanyahu, has faced threats if he does not quit or drop charges against the prime minister, which if proven could send him to jail for 10 years.

Just last week, Mandelblit exonerated Netanyahu of exploiting billion-dollar contracts for submarines and warships from German steelmaker Thyssenkrupp for his own or his associates’ benefit. His announcement that Netanyahu was not a suspect, even though police recommended indicting some of his associates and relatives, has led to widespread incredulity. Netanyahu, determined to ensure that there would be no parliamentary commission of inquiry into the submarine affair, halted the coronavirus cabinet meeting on Wednesday morning so Likud ministers could vote against it. Senior military and public officials are also suspected of bribery.

So intent is Netanyahu on remaining in power and thereby avoiding or postponing his trial that he has made numerous concessions to his ultra-Orthodox and

nationalist support base, inciting divisions between Israel's secular and religious communities. Most recently, he approved the construction of around 4,000 new homes in the settlements in the occupied West Bank. In scenes reminiscent of his chief international backer, US President Donald Trump, he has repeatedly incited his supporters to take action against his political opponents, including the judiciary.

Protesters in Haifa, Jerusalem and Ramat Gan reportedly faced pepper spray attacks from Netanyahu supporters. One man, who was carrying a knife in his pocket, threw bottles at demonstrators outside Netanyahu's official residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem. In Tel Aviv, a group of about 20 boys on bikes and scooters threw two small explosives at protesters, calling them "traitors" and "leftists." Other incidents were reported in the Jezreel Valley and the northern town of Kiryat Ata.

La Familia—the Beitar Jerusalem soccer fan club known for its far-right, anti-Arab ideology—has also been involved in the violence. At a protest on Thursday night in Holon, an impoverished suburb in southern Tel Aviv, members of La Familia moved between the two main protest sites attacking protesters.

Orly Lev, a well-known agitator and Netanyahu supporter, had previously addressed a crowd of 100 pro-Netanyahu demonstrators, saying, "The people need to understand that we cannot remain silent, that these folks need to be expelled from the streets and from the country, to be thrown over the border."

Speaking about the attacks in Holon, Yair Lapid, leader of opposition party Yesh Atid, said, "I warned time and time again that Netanyahu's incitement will turn into violence in the streets. It was clear that it would happen." Protest movement leaders have accused the police of protecting pro-Netanyahu thugs while using excessive force against peaceful anti-Netanyahu protesters, citing video clips of protesters being shoved or punched.

The increasing violence in confrontations between anti- and pro-Netanyahu demonstrators have caused several commentators to warn of the descent into civil war.

Even before the latest attacks, President Reuven Rivlin, a Likud member once close to Netanyahu, addressed the opening of the Knesset's winter session to try to calm the political temperature. He warned, "It is unthinkable that every night, demonstrators are beating demonstrators. Police are beating demonstrators. Demonstrators are throwing stones at the police. Israel's tribalism is breaking out through the cracks, and accusatory fingers

are pointed from one part of society to the other, one tribe to the other."

This was a reference to his well-known speech at the 2015 annual Herzliya Conference—the stage used for setting out national policy by Israel's most prominent leaders. Rivlin described four separate groups split along "tribal" lines—secular, national/religious, ultra-orthodox and Arab—emerging from the country's socio-economic shifts and warned of the lack of unity and cohesion among them.

He continued, "Stop! Please stop! This is not the way. Pain must have its place. ... It seems to me as if we have lost the moral compass that was with us from the state's independence until today. The compass of fundamental principles and values that we are committed to uphold."

This situation has developed due to the so-called "opposition" to Netanyahu, whose policies are barely distinguishable from those of this venal politician. To the extent that opposition to him is growing in the population, it is his right-wing opponents, led by Yamina leader and former aide and minister in Netanyahu's governments, Naftali Bennett, that are the beneficiaries.

Netanyahu's Likud-Blue and White coalition barely functions and is set to collapse if an already delayed budget is not agreed by December 23. This would trigger the fourth election since mid-2019 and exacerbate the economic crisis that could affect the country's credit ratings. Three senior finance ministry officials have already resigned citing their frustration over the political infighting. According to opinion polls, support for Yamina is growing fast, possibly enabling him to form a majority government without Likud, the ultra-Orthodox and Arab parties.

These developments show that there can be no serious fight against the pandemic, destitution levels of unemployment and poverty, and the growth of far right and fascist forces outside of an independent movement of the unified working class in opposition to the entire political establishment and the capitalist system it defends.



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