

Israel's "government of change" shows its right-wing credentials

Jean Shaoul
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Israel's parliament rejected a move by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's newly formed "government of change" to extend a blatantly racist law, akin to South Africa's apartheid laws, that bans residency or citizenship rights for Palestinians from the occupied territories married to Israelis.

The tied vote of 59 to 59, coming three weeks after the new government unseated long-standing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and was sworn in, is widely viewed as a defeat for Bennett, who was unable to unite his coalition partners in what he referred to as a "referendum" on his new government.

Bennett, who is even more right-wing than Netanyahu, has a very tenuous grip on power. Far from being resolved, Israel's political crisis is set to deepen.

While the vote means that tens of thousands of Palestinians can now apply for Israeli residency and citizenship, it will have no practical effect. Their applications would be rejected by the Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked, notorious for her hatred of the Palestinians, pending new legislation to renew the Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law.

Adalah, a legal advocacy groups for Israel's Palestinian citizens said, "This law is one of most discriminatory and racist laws promulgated by Israel, and thus it must be condemned and revoked." It added, "No democratic country in the world denies residency or citizenship to spouses of its own citizens on the basis of their spouses' national, racial or ethnic affiliation, while simultaneously labelling them as enemies."

According to human rights groups, the Citizenship and Entry Law bars almost 45,000 Palestinian families inside Israel and East Jerusalem from reuniting with their spouses and children and was designed as a means of limiting the number of Palestinians holding Israeli citizenship, or residency in the case of East Jerusalem.

The law, introduced in 2003 amid the second Palestinian intifada, must be renewed annually, as has happened for the past 17 years. This year it was torpedoed by the opposition parties, led by Netanyahu, not because they oppose the renewal, far from it, but because they saw an opportunity to destabilise the new government, a fractious coalition of eight parties spanning almost the entire spectrum of official Israeli politics.

Speaking on Monday before the vote, Netanyahu said, "With all due respect for this law, the importance of toppling the government is greater." He added, "This isn't just a law. It's a law that exposes the fault-line in this government, whose purpose is to advance an anti-Zionist agenda."

This attempt to brand the coalition as anti-Zionist focuses on the inclusion of the Islamist Ra'am party headed by Mansour Abbas. Netanyahu was referring to the "compromise" on the citizenship law that Bennett had proposed to his "liberal" partners in the coalition, Meretz, which supports the "two-state solution," and Ra'am, whereby the legislation would be renewed for six months, while offering residency rights to 1,600 Palestinian families—a tiny fraction of those affected. This came in the wake of two failed attempts to get agreement from his partners, forcing him to twice postpone the vote. But his compromise was rejected by two Ra'am legislators, who abstained, as well as one member of Bennett's own right-wing Yamina Party, who voted against the extension.

Netanyahu had sought to turn the vote into a no-confidence motion, but that would have required an absolute majority of 61 in the 120-seat Parliament, and so the government survived.

On Monday, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, who as leader of the second-largest party in the Knesset

cobbled together the unwieldy, eight-party coalition and would become prime minister in two years' time if the coalition survives that long, made clear the compromise was not motivated by any democratic sentiments. He stated bluntly that the law was more about demographic engineering and "is of security importance." He tweeted, "[There's] no need to hide from the purpose of the [citizenship] law. It's one of the tools meant to secure a Jewish majority in Israel. Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, and our goal is that it will have a Jewish majority."

The Bennett-Lapid bloc is united on little other than the need to remove Netanyahu, who is unpopular with the incoming Democratic administration of President Joe Biden and faces a criminal trial on charges of corruption. All its leading lights were once aides to Netanyahu, occupied senior government posts under his leadership and have no significant political differences with him. Their mission is to rescue the financial and corporate elite from the impending economic, social and political storm at the expense of Jewish and Palestinian workers within Israel/Palestine and the working class across the resource-rich Middle East.

Promising to focus on policies that unite them, infrastructure and the economy, and which avoid the Israel/Palestinian conflict, they moved quickly to strengthen ties with the Biden administration and to launch an inquiry into the religious pilgrimage to Mount Meron last April that killed 45 people. But fatuous declarations notwithstanding, they cannot avoid the Israel/Palestinian conflict that is bound up with the establishment of the State of Israel as a Jewish homeland in the form of a capitalist state created by the dispossession of the Palestinian people and maintained through war and repression, and social inequality at home.

Bennett's first act as prime minister was to approve Netanyahu's decision to allow a provocative march by thousands of Jewish extremists through Palestinian neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem, to mark the anniversary of Israel's capture of East Jerusalem in the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and its illegal annexation. Initially conceived as a means of derailing Lapid's efforts to form an anti-Netanyahu coalition, it was given the go-ahead by Netanyahu in his last days in office to appease his far-right supporters and destabilise the incoming government. The march

was afforded full police protection, while additional police and military forces were deployed near the Gaza Strip and in towns with mixed populations of Jewish and Palestinian citizens.

Two days later, Bennett authorised airstrikes on Gaza, following the launching of incendiary balloons from Gaza that caused some fires in open fields in southern Israel. It came hard on the heels of Israel's criminal 11-day assault, presided over by Netanyahu and now Bennett's Minister of Defence Benny Gantz, on the besieged enclave that killed more than 250 Palestinians, including 66 children and 39 women, injured 1,900 more and destroyed numerous buildings and displaced at least 60,000 people. Since then, Bennett has prevented any financial and material assistance for reconstruction, estimated by the World Bank to cost \$485 million, from entering Gaza where 62 percent of the population face food insecurity. He has refused to ease Israel's blockade until Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group that rules the enclave, agrees to return the bodies of four Israelis missing in action in Gaza.

Bennett, a former settlement council leader who in 2012 said he would refuse a military order to evict settlers from the West Bank, has signalled that the settlement outpost Evyatar in the occupied West Bank, illegal even under Israeli law, will be allowed to go ahead. The outpost, set up quickly in the last few months, has sparked daily protests by local Palestinians in which at least four have been killed and hundreds injured by Israeli soldiers firing live rounds.

While the 50 settler families are required to leave the site, their makeshift homes will remain under the protection of a new military base to be established there. If, after reviewing the land's ownership, the government decides that some or all of the land belongs to the Israeli state and not the local Palestinian farmers who have owned the land for decades, as tax returns dating back to the 1930s demonstrate, the settlers will be allowed to build a religious school on the site, in effect legalising the outpost.



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