100,000 protest Israel's far-right government plans to politically control judiciary

Jean Shaoul
15 January 2023

One hundred thousand Israelis braved the rain on Saturday to rally in Tel Aviv's Habima Square to protest Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to change the country's legal system and weaken the Supreme Court. With thousands more rallying in Jerusalem, Haifa and the northern town of Rosh Pina, the demonstrations were by far the largest anti-government protests in recent years.

While many protesters carried Israeli flags, others held homemade placards warning against "Fascism," "Coup d'état," "Criminal Government, "The End of Democracy," attacks on democratic and social rights, and corruption. Demonstrators voiced their opposition to Netanyahu's return to power. One poster read, "We will die before giving up on democracy."

Others carried Palestinian flags in defiance of the new minister of national security and Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben-Gvir's call for the police to crack down on people carrying Palestinian flags in public spaces. His order came after a few protesters waved Palestinian flags at last Saturday's anti-government demonstration in Tel Aviv, prompting furious criticism from Netanyahu and his far-right allies.

Saturday's demonstrations were far larger than last week's protest, testifying to the increasing concerns and anger on the part of Israelis, Jewish and Palestinian, over the political programme of Netanyahu's far-right coalition government, which includes Likud, three fascistic and racist parties—Religious Zionism, Jewish Power and Noam—and two right-wing religious parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism.

Their agenda is Jewish supremacy and apartheid rule, the annexation of large swathes of the West Bank, the expansion of illegal settlements, Jewish prayer at al-Aqsa Mosque and the rollback of anti-discrimination measures. This can be accomplished only through sweeping changes to Israel's legal system and stepped-up police and military repression against political dissent, be it from Palestinians in the territories occupied illegally since the 1967 Arab Israeli war, or from workers, Jewish and Palestinian, in Israel.

Under the new government's signature legislation announced by Justice Minister Yariv Levin, the High Court's ability to strike down laws or sections of a law will be severely limited and a simple majority in Israel's single-chamber parliament will be able to override any such rulings. The High Court would be stripped of its power to use "reasonableness" as a criterion for determining whether or not government decisions are lawful. The government would take control over the appointment of judges, while ministers would be free to appoint their own legal advisors, whose advice would not be legally binding.

A second phase of the legislation is being drafted and is expected to split the role of the attorney general in two—one for the government's legal adviser and the other for the state prosecutor. This would allow Netanyahu to replace Attorney General Baharav-Miara with a prosecutor of his choosing, who would either revise or revoke the corruption charges against him.

Currently in court facing charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases, bound up with his efforts to control the media, Netanyahu claims to be the victim of a witch-hunt by a hostile media, police and left-wing prosecutors. He poured fuel on the fire by offering two cabinet post to Aryeh Deri, leader of the Shas religious party, who served a jail sentence in 1999 for taking bribes and was convicted last year of tax fraud. Deri's appointment is now being challenged in the High Court, using the criterion of the "reasonableness" of appointing a twice-convicted criminal.

In the two weeks since the swearing in of the most right-wing government in Israel's history, with a majority of just four in the 120-seat Knesset:

© World Socialist Web Site

* Thirteen Palestinians, including three children, have been killed by Israeli soldiers. This follows a record year of violence by security forces and settlers under the previous "government of change" headed by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, when at least 167 were killed in the West Bank, the highest death toll since 2005.

* Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the Religious Zionist party and advocate of annexing the entire West Bank, who is now in charge of settlement construction, seized $40 million held by Israel that belong to the Palestinian Authority.

* National Security Minister and Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben-Gvir staged a provocative visit to the al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City as part of his campaign to enable Jews to pray at the site.

* Ben-Gvir ordered police to use water cannon against anti-government demonstrators and arrest protesters blocking roads, saying that last week's Saturday evening demonstration in Tel Aviv caused "serious harm to democracy."

* Jewish Power legislator Zvika Fogel accused opposition leader and former prime minister Yair Lapid and former Defence Minister Benny Gantz of "treason against the homeland" for supporting the demonstration.

On Thursday, the president of the Supreme Court, Chief Justice Esther Hayut, said the proposals were designed to "deal a mortal blow to the independence of the judiciary and silence it." Justice Minister Levin, speaking on television, accused her of having joined activists in their call "to set the streets alight."

Israel's former attorney generals and almost all the former state prosecutors published a letter warning that without significant changes, the government's plans could lead to an unprecedented constitutional crisis, with a confrontation between the judiciary and the government.

On Thursday, hundreds of lawyers, former judges and legal professionals staged a one-hour strike outside major courts.

Speaking at Saturday's rally in Tel Aviv were former defense minister Benny Gantz, Labor Party chairwoman Merav Michaeli, the leader of the Arab Ra'am Party, Mansour Abbas, and the head of Hadash-Ta'al, Ayman Odeh, and politicians from Yesh Atid and the other opposition parties. Touted as a "government of change," the previous administration instead adopted the policies of the former Netanyahu-led coalition government, paving the way for his return to power.

Netanyahu said he had no intention of backtracking on his plans, insisting that the November election gave him a mandate to "comprehensively reform the judicial system." He added, "More than that, they demanded it."

President Isaac Herzog has sought to mediate between the government and its opposition critics, holding "intense conversations" with Levin, Netanyahu and Hayut in a bid to reach a compromise.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in its New Year statement pointing to developments in the US and Europe, "The breakdown of democracy and the growing political influence of far-right and fascistic movements is a global phenomenon."

Netanyahu's plans are a direct assault on Israel's very limited checks on the government's power. Israel has no constitution or second legislative chamber. The anti-democratic moves flow inexorably from the acute crisis of the Zionist state. Israel is one of the most socially unequal countries within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) group of rich nations, and the increasingly authoritarian character of the political system is the inevitable outcome of the Zionist project of establishing a Jewish state through the violent dispossession of the indigenous Arab population.

A new upsurge of the working class is beginning, pointing the way forward for the masses of Jewish and Arab workers in the form of a united struggle to overthrow the Zionist state and the various Arab bourgeois regimes and forge the United Socialist States of the Middle East. Sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International must be built in Israel and across the Middle East to provide the political leadership necessary to conduct this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site