

Anti-Netanyahu protests continue, but their Zionist agenda cannot combat fascist threat

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More than 130,000 people rallied on Saturday evening in Tel Aviv to voice their opposition to the fascistic government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Another hundred thousand rallied in 60 towns and cities across Israel, with the organisers claiming that 250,000 people in total had participated.

This was the seventh consecutive weekly protest against Netanyahu's plans to give his government the dictatorial powers to enforce an agenda driven by the needs of Israel's oligarchs.

At the end of last year, after four years of increasing political instability, Netanyahu, Israel's longest serving prime minister, assembled a coalition made up of far-right, racist and ultra-religious figures. They collectively seek the total annexation of the West Bank, which Israel has illegally occupied since the 1967 Arab Israeli war; are committed to apartheid rule as embodied in the "Nation-State Law" that enshrines Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state; and to Jewish prayer at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. They are determined to roll back already circumscribed anti-discrimination measures through sweeping changes to Israel's legal system and to step up police and military repression against the Palestinians and against workers, Jewish and Palestinian, in Israel itself.

Netanyahu has given a prominent role to Bezalel Smotrich, a settler and the leader of the ultra-nationalist Religious Zionism Party, assigning him not only the finance ministry but also responsibility for Israel's West Bank settlements, ensuring their expansion.

Another key figure is Itamar Ben-Gvir, Jewish Power leader who was once a member of Kach, a party that was outlawed in Israel and spent 25 years on the US State Department's list of terrorist organizations. He heads national security and controls the police and is establishing the National Guard as his own militia to enforce military rule in Israel's mixed Palestinian-Jewish cities. His first act was a provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa compound in Israeli-occupied East Jerusalem, the third holiest Muslim site.

Netanyahu, facing multiple corruption charges, appointed Ariele Dery, Shas leader and thrice convicted for financial misconduct, to head two ministries—health and interior—an appointment since ruled by the High Court as "unreasonable."

This week the Knesset is discussing legislation preventing the High Court from carrying out judicial reviews of government actions that relate to Israel's quasi-constitutional Basic Laws and increasing the number of political appointees to the judge selection committee. Another bill will require unanimous agreement by the court in any judicial review, while allowing a simple Knesset majority to overrule the court on the striking of laws. Taken together, these laws will give the government unassailable powers.

Netanyahu's plans have aroused the anger of almost the entire legal establishment, as well as a layer of secular generals and opposition leaders from Israel's short-lived and misnamed "government of change" under Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz, many of whom have served in governments headed by Netanyahu in the past. Commentators in Israel and internationally are talking of a constitutional crisis and the possibility of civil war.

Netanyahu's coalition partners have demanded that Lapid and Gantz, along with former generals Moshe Ya'alon and Yair Golan, are charged with "treason against the homeland" after they called for "widespread civil disobedience" to halt the judicial coup. His Likud Party filed a complaint with the police against former Prime Minister Ehud Barak and opposition activists over alleged incitement and for civil disobedience.

Police commissioner Kobi Shabtai is preparing his forces to suppress dissent. Speaking on television, he said, "The current situation makes me sleepless, we are on a steep slope," and that the authorities were taking precautions against assassinations. He added that he had established a special unit against incitement to violence, saying, "The Israel Police will not allow violent discourse or any publication that incites violence and harm to public figures or any person."

The rallies were addressed by former general Moshe Ya'alon, Lapid and Gantz—right-wing figures with few policy differences with Netanyahu who fear his fascist-backed power grab is endangering the stability of capitalist rule and the Israeli state.

Many demonstrators at Saturday's rallies carried Israeli flags and chanted "No to Dictatorship" and "Democracy." Some called on Netanyahu's paymasters in Washington to rein in the new government. This is an exercise in futility and deception.

While US ambassador Tom Nides called for Netanyahu to “pump the brakes,” he insisted that, despite disagreements over the government’s plans for the judiciary and settlement expansion, the US would continue to have “Israel’s back on security and at the UN... It’s going to be rough, but... you can have a great relationship with your ally, and when you disagree, you disagree.”

A small number of protesters defied the enforced Zionist consensus, linking the decades of Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories with the decline of democracy, with posters reading, “Rights for Jews only is not a democracy” and “A nation that occupies another nation will never be free,” in Arabic, Hebrew and English.

The Histadrut trade unions do not support the demonstrations, doing everything in their power to limit workers’ strikes and protests against the government.

The leaders of the demonstrations are hostile to any appeal to Israel’s Palestinian citizens, turning away Palestinians in earlier demonstrations and enthusiastically and often violently enforcing the ban on Palestinian flags instigated by Ben-Gvir, with the result that few Palestinians have taken part. Instead, the protests have been limited to protecting the Supreme Court, which has nodded through Israel’s Jewish Nation-State Law and authorized settlements, land seizures and evictions in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah.

Netanyahu’s efforts to eliminate the Supreme Court’s occasional and limited restraints on government actions go hand-in-hand with stepped-up harassment, including arrests, body searches, detentions at checkpoints and tickets for unjustified traffic offences, and repression of the Palestinians both in the occupied territories and Israel.

Hardly a day goes by without the killing of Palestinians by the security forces or armed settlers. New legislation strips the families of Palestinians accused of terrorism of their residency or citizenship rights if they have accepted financial aid from the Palestinian Authority. This could affect 140 Israeli Palestinians and 211 Palestinians from East Jerusalem with Israeli residency permits, a crime under international law. The government is to approve the widespread licensing of guns for Jews, tantamount to legitimising vigilante groups. It has recognized nine settler outposts in the occupied West Bank and approved the construction of 10,000 homes in existing settlements. This prompted calls for a general strike in East Jerusalem on Sunday.

While there is no doubting the democratic impulses of many of those participating in the rallies, they are a dead end without rejecting a political leadership and perspective that upholds Jewish “national unity” based on the oppression of the Palestinians and the rule of the financial oligarchy.

Israel is one of the most socially polarised countries in the world. With around 71 billionaires in 2021, and the second highest number of billionaires per capita in the world. The richest 10 percent of Israelis control 62 percent of the wealth,

while the top 1 percent control no less than 31 percent.

For years, its ruling elite has been slashing social welfare programs and key public services such as education, health and transport, upon which Israeli workers depend, and attacking wages and working conditions in pursuit of “free market” policies.

It is this huge disparity in wealth and the consequent explosive social tensions that has driven the Zionist regime’s rabid nationalism, implementation of apartheid-like measures under the stepped-up attacks on the Palestinians and its provocative stance against Iran and its allies in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen. Its aim is to rally Jewish Israelis under the Zionist flag and deflect rising social and political tensions outwards.

It is the commonality of the class issues faced by Palestinian (both within Israel and the occupied territories) and Jewish workers that provides the objective foundation for a united political offensive against the Israeli state, the Arab bourgeois regimes that have now openly lined up with Israel, and their imperialist sponsors.

Israeli workers can make no progress in the fight against the government’s plans for a dictatorship without turning to the Palestinians. This means rejecting the Zionist project of a Jewish State based upon the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Palestinian population and unifying their struggles with those of the Palestinian workers for the overthrow of the capitalist profit system and the nation-state framework on which it is based. It means a fight for the socialist reorganization of the economy of the entire Middle East region so that its vast resources can be utilised for the benefit of all its peoples.

Such a perspective must be fought for against all those parties and organisations that work to subordinate the working class to an alliance with one or another of the imperialist powers and the Arab regimes. It means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Israel/Palestine and throughout the Middle East to lead and organize this struggle.



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