

Netanyahu's coalition rams through judicial coup law in Israel despite largest ever protest movement

Jean Shaoul
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On Monday, just before the Knesset's summer recess, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, consisting of his right-wing Likud Party, ultra-religious parties and fascist parties based on settlers on the West Bank, rammed through the first in a series of laws aimed at curtailing the powers of the Supreme Court.

The bill passed 64-0 after the opposition boycotted the vote in protest and stormed out of the chamber, chanting "shame." There are 56 members in the various opposition parties, so Netanyahu's bid for absolute power by ending judicial oversight of his government is based on a narrow majority.

The law, enacted as a Basic Law that is the nearest Israel has to a constitution, ends the Court's power to strike down the decisions of elected officials on the grounds of "unreasonableness," by granting the Knesset the power to overturn the Court's ruling with a simple majority.

It will enable Netanyahu to reappoint his key ally, Shas party leader Aryeh Deri, as head of the Health and Interior Ministries, an action the Supreme Court overturned as being "unreasonable" due to Deri's multiple convictions for fraud, bribery and tax evasion, as well as his pledge as part of a plea bargain not to seek public office again.

Even more importantly, the legislation will enable Netanyahu to press ahead with other dictatorial measures, secure in the knowledge that the Court—the only state institution that is able to hold Israel's single-chamber parliament to account and which his right-wing cabal does not control—will be unable to overturn them. It will also facilitate legal moves that will enable Netanyahu, currently on trial on corruption charges that could put him behind bars for years, to evade conviction or see his case dismissed.

Netanyahu's fascistic coalition partners are openly bragging about their power to do whatever they like. They have long railed against the Court for its occasional restrictions on the settler outposts, deemed illegal even under Israeli law. Speaking to reporters after the bill became law, National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, a settler leader who heads the fascistic Jewish Power, said the passage of the law was "only the beginning" and that "There are many more laws we

need to pass as part of the judicial overhaul."

Netanyahu has pledged to defy international law and annex the West Bank, illegally occupied by Israel since the 1967 war with its Arab neighbours. This land seizure is in pursuit of his coalition's twin aims of establishing a Jewish-supremacist state in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories and increasing the power of the religious authorities over everyday life.

Far-right ministers have called for laws banning Arab parties from participating in elections and discriminating against Israel's own Palestinian citizens, as well as gay and non-religious people, and enforcing gender separation in public places. Their next step is legislation granting the government greater power in appointing the judiciary.

Monday's passage of the "reasonableness override" law took place in the face of the largest demonstrations on Saturday and Sunday that Israel has ever seen, a movement that Netanyahu says is endangering Israel's democratic system.

Tens of thousands took part in a five-day march from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in scorching heat to protest outside the Knesset on Saturday, while more than 100,000 people flocked to Tel Aviv on Saturday evening for the 29th consecutive week of demonstrations, and similar numbers took part in rallies in towns and cities across the country. Israel's doctors went on a two-hour strike in protest, while tens of thousands of protesters shut down roads and infrastructure, sparking fears of violent confrontations between protesters and the government's far-right supporters.

More than 10,000 army reservists—including hundreds of air force pilots, cyber warfare experts, and commanders of elite units upon which the IDF depends—have announced they will refuse to serve if the judicial coup goes ahead, saying they are unwilling to continue risking their lives for a government that is no longer democratic. Netanyahu has lambasted them for "crossing a red line" when Israel faces external threats and depends upon a reservist army. Security and defence officials have written to the government warning that this could have a significant impact on the air force and its operational readiness.

The unprecedented opposition to the Netanyahu

government's abandonment of bourgeois-democratic norms is fuelled as well by the widespread economic hardships produced by the soaring cost of living, including the sky-high cost of housing, as well as deepening concerns over failing public services, such as education, health and transport, and the increasing role of ultra-orthodox religious groups over everyday life. No less important are the deep fears that the US-NATO-led war in Ukraine against Russia will escalate into a far broader conflagration, even as the government stokes war against the Palestinians, Iran and Iran's allies in the region.

It is expected that the Supreme Court will review the legislation and strike it down, leading to a constitutional showdown with the government and a broader political crisis that commentators fear could escalate into civil war.

The Movement for Quality Government argues that the law is unconstitutional, as "it fundamentally changes the basic structure of Israeli parliamentary democracy and the nature of the regime, while de facto abolishing the judiciary and seriously damaging the delicate fabric of the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances in the State of Israel." It has petitioned the Court to rule against the law, saying, "The government of destruction has raised its malicious hand against the State of Israel; now it's the Supreme Court's turn to step up and prevent this legislation."

Mass rallies against the bill continued on Monday, with protesters blocking roads, to which the police responded by using water cannon to disperse them and arresting at least 20 people. Israel's Medical Association has announced a 24-hour hospital strike for Tuesday.

The self-proclaimed opposition leaders, including former ministers, generals and security and intelligence officials, many of whom have served under Netanyahu, have pledged to continue the anti-government demonstrations and rallies. They have no fundamental policy differences with the government, but fear that Netanyahu is going too far in establishing a personalist dictatorship based on fascist and ultra-religious groups, which will destabilize the country politically and socially. Israel is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with enormous wealth accumulated by a handful of super-rich families, while most Israeli workers, Jewish and Arab alike, struggle to survive.

Like former Prime Minister Yair Lapid and Defence Minister Benny Gantz, they are no less committed than Israel's far-right government to the Zionist state and its oppression of the Palestinian people. They have drowned the mass rallies in a sea of Israeli flags and refused to make any appeal to Israel's Palestinian citizens, much less to the Palestinians in the occupied territories, who have long suffered under Israel's savage military repression and brazen vigilante and settler violence—all upheld by the Supreme Court and reinforced by the protest "leaders" when they were in office.

These opposition leaders sought to "negotiate" with Netanyahu—fruitlessly as it turned out--after he agreed to

"pause" the legislation at the end of March in the face of the largest outpouring of popular opposition in Israel's history, which included massive street protests and a full-scale walkout by large sections of the Israeli working class.

Lapid and Gantz duly fell in line and gave Netanyahu their full-throated support when he used the "pause" to mount a series of criminal provocations against the Palestinians in the West Bank, which Israel has illegally occupied for 56 years. They also backed his military operations against Iran, Syria and Lebanon, whose aim was to deflect tensions outwards and create a sense of national unity.

Now Lapid has promised to petition the High Court against the new law, calling it an abuse of power, while urging military reservists to wait before pulling out of military service, saying, "Don't stop serving, while we still don't know the High Court of Justice's ruling."

The working class has the power to bring down Netanyahu's far-right coalition through a general strike, which would have the support of the majority of the Israeli population. However, a major obstacle has been the corporatist Histadrut trade union federation, which has from its establishment been committed to the Zionist project. It has refused to mobilise its members against the government, pushing frantically for some kind of "mediation" or compromise. The only time in the last seven months of mass weekly protests that Histadrut chief Arnon Bar-David called a general strike was in response to Netanyahu's sacking of his defence minister Yoav Gallant after Gallant had called on him to abandon the plan to neuter the judiciary because the political conflict over it was splitting the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).

Now Bar-David, who is coming under increasing pressure to call a strike, is preparing a token stoppage to allow his members to let off steam. He declared, "From this moment on any unilateral advancement of the reform will have grave consequences, up to and including a full strike" of workers' unions throughout the country. No trust can be placed in this faithful servant of the Israeli bourgeoisie.

It poses the urgent necessity of breaking the stranglehold of the reactionary Zionist leadership of the protest movement and fighting to unite Arab and Jewish workers, along with workers internationally, in a common struggle to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights, including those of the Palestinian people. This can only be done based on the programme and perspective of international socialism.



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