

Israeli rallies demand end of Netanyahu government, early elections and a hostage release deal

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More than 100,000 people rallied outside the Knesset in Jerusalem Sunday night in the biggest protest against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's fascist government since the start of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza in October.

The demonstration called for the government to step down, hold early elections and agree a deal to secure the release of the hostages still held by Hamas and other Palestinian groups in Gaza. Of the 134 hostages still in captivity, at least 36 are dead according to Israeli military sources, likely an underestimate. Speakers called on opposition leaders, former military chiefs Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, to leave the government coalition and fight for elections.

The protests have been organised by a range of groups, including some that led the nine-month-long anti-government protests last year, although Netanyahu's judicial overhaul was off the agenda. They held blue and white Israeli flags and banners reading "Elections now" and chanted slogans such as "You destroyed the country and we will fix it." While the main protest was held outside the Knesset, several hundred tried to block Begin Boulevard, one of the main roads around Jerusalem, with the police using skunk water to disperse the crowds and arresting a score of demonstrators.

Protest leaders, including the Kaplan Force and Brothers in Arms, said they would set up more than 100 tents near the Knesset and hold protests, rallies and activities until Wednesday. With Netanyahu declaring that the war will go on for months, they fear every passing day will cost the lives of more hostages. The Knesset has voted to go into recess from April 7 to May 19.

Yair Lapid, opposition leader and former prime minister, was the keynote speaker at the rally. He said Netanyahu was destroying Israel's relationship with its chief backer, the United States, and leaving the captives to their fate. The crowd responded, "Elections now! Elections now!"

There has been widespread and mounting criticism of the government's failure to heed warnings that an attack by

Hamas on southern Israel was imminent and its decision to stand down security meant to protect the towns and villages—in fact deliberate actions aimed at creating a pretext for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza.

A separate group of protesters, led by the Brothers in Arms reservists, rallied in Me'a She'arim, an ultra-orthodox neighbourhood of Jerusalem, calling for an end to the exemption of ultra-orthodox religious students from the universal requirement to serve in the military.

Young men are currently required to serve for 32 months—and women for 24 months—and as reservists thereafter for 54 days in a three-year period until they are at least 40 years of age. The exemption, originating in a deal worked out in 1948, has long angered secular Israelis and has become increasingly controversial during the war that has so far killed about 600 soldiers—the highest number in years.

The Knesset is discussing new legislation that would allow the ultra-orthodox to avoid army service, following a ruling by the Supreme Court that such exemptions are illegal and must end by March 31, now deferred to April 30. Netanyahu's far-right and ultra-orthodox partners have vowed to resign from his government if the law is not passed.

Adding to the mounting sense of political crisis is another Supreme Court ruling ordering an end to government subsidies for many ultra-Orthodox men who study the Torah in religious schools instead of serving in the army.

Another demonstration took place in Tel Aviv where some families of hostages and their supporters blocked a main highway, protesting against Netanyahu's refusal to conduct meaningful negotiations with Hamas.

Sunday's rallies followed protests in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, Be'er Sheva, Caesarea and other cities Saturday evening demanding the release of the hostages, branding Netanyahu an "obstacle to the deal". There is a widespread recognition that without a deal the hostages will die in

captivity, given Netanyahu's pledge to mount a ground invasion of Rafah, where more than 1.5 million Palestinians, mostly displaced from other areas of Gaza, are trapped.

Amos Malka, a former head of the military intelligence directorate, told the rally, "If the families knew how small the gap is, which Netanyahu is refusing to close in negotiations with Hamas, they would explode."

Speaking at a hastily summoned press conference shortly before he was due to go into hospital for surgery, Netanyahu said, "The call for elections now, a moment before victory, would paralyze Israel for at least half a year. It would paralyze the negotiations for freeing our hostages, it would bring the war to an end before its goals are completely achieved, and the first that would welcome this is Hamas, and that tells you everything." He insisted the offensive against Rafah would go ahead.

The protests take place amid increasing social dislocation and unrest as a result of the war. In February, Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics reported that Israel's \$500 billion economy had contracted by nearly 20 percent in the last quarter of 2023, as a result of the internal displacement of nearly 200,000 people near Israel's borders with Gaza and Lebanon, the call up of 360,000 reservists (scaled back in January), the withdrawal of work permits for 75,000 Palestinians from the West Bank and 12,000 from Gaza that work mainly in construction and agriculture, as well as 15,000 undocumented workers, and the loss of vital revenues from tourism and high tech industries.

The Bank of Israel warned that the war was likely to cost \$53 billion through to 2025 due to the increased cost of funding the military and the loss of tax revenue. Last week, high school students organised a one-day walkout over the lack of funding for education, teacher shortages and unresolved salary negotiations between the Finance Ministry and the Teachers' Union.

Also animating the growing movement against Netanyahu are concerns about Israel's increasing isolation on the global arena and the damage done to the country's reputation even by the Biden administration's muted criticisms, necessitated by fears that the Democrats could lose votes, particularly among young people, in November's presidential election in swing states such as Michigan.

To the extent that the Biden administration views opposition leader and war cabinet member Benny Gantz as a more acceptable leader, opposition to Netanyahu has focused on his leading polls predicting defeat for Netanyahu in a general election, with a working majority of 71 seats in the 120 seat Knesset. But this is only because this former military chief of staff would be more "efficient" in prosecuting the war on Gaza that is the opening move in a wider war planned against Iran and its allies in Lebanon and

Syria, as part of US preparations for war on China.

Demands for Netanyahu and his fascist gang to step down, hold fresh elections and secure the release of the hostages are valid. But they can never be achieved by appealing to a war criminal like Gantz, whose entire career has demonstrated his commitment to militarism in pursuit of Israel's objectives, including the "final solution" of the Palestinians. Launching his 2019 election campaign, Gantz bragged about his role as commander of the Israel Defence Forces in the 2014 Gaza War in "sending parts of Gaza back to the Stone Age"—a policy he is now completing as a member of Netanyahu's war cabinet.

It is essential that Israeli workers and young people follow the lead taken by many Jews internationally and take a determined stand against the war in Gaza, as part of a mass international anti-war movement against capitalism and for socialism. It means breaking with all factions of the Zionist bourgeoisie, taking up the defence of the lives of the Palestinians and not just hostages, forging the unity of the Palestinian and Jewish working class in a struggle for socialism against their common oppressors.

The critical task facing workers and youth is the building of independent revolutionary parties, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, including an Israeli-Palestinian section, to provide the political leadership needed to overthrow the Zionist state and the Arab bourgeois regimes and build a United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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