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Mass protests against Israel's far-right government: A harbinger of revolutionary struggle

Saturday's mass protest in Tel Aviv marks a significant shift in the political life of Israel, the Middle East and the world.

Just two weeks after the election of the most far-right coalition government in the nation's history, one riddled with racists and outright fascists, around 100,000 gathered in Habima Square protesting plans by the new regime to assert direct political control over the judiciary. Thousands more protested in Jerusalem outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's home, and in Haifa and Rosh Pina.

Legislation announced by Justice Minister Yariv Levin is set to curtail the High Court's ability to strike down laws and allow parliament to override any such rulings. The government would also take control over the appointment of judges and do away with the post of attorney general. This would allow Netanyahu to appoint his own state prosecutor, helping him to avoid his own prosecution on corruption charges. More importantly, it would facilitate plans for stepped up settlement construction in preparation for annexing much of the West Bank.



Israelis protest against the government's plans to overhaul the country's legal system, in Tel Aviv, Israel, January 14, 2023. [AP Photo/Oded Balilty]

However, opposition to the new government stretches far beyond this question. Netanyahu's coalition includes his own Likud party, the fascistic and racist parties Religious Zionism, Jewish Power and Noam, and the right-wing religious parties Shas and United Torah Judaism. It stands for Jewish supremacy and apartheid rule; the permanent seizure of the Palestinian territories; Jewish prayer at the al-Aqsa Mosque; the rollback of anti-discrimination measures through sweeping changes to Israel's legal system; and stepped-up police and military repression against the Palestinians and workers, Jewish and Palestinian, in Israel itself.

New Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich of Religious Zionism was recorded declaring, "I'm a fascist homophobe." One of his first acts was to seize \$40 million in tax revenues Israel had collected on the Palestinian Authority's behalf. New National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, of Jewish Power, meanwhile immediately made a deliberately provocative visit to Jerusalem's most sensitive religious site, the Al Aqsa compound.

The coming to power of such political criminals and provocateurs has aroused mass anger. Homemade placards on the protest warned against "fascism," a "coup d'état," a "criminal government," and "the end of democracy." Jewish people joined Israeli Arabs in carrying Palestinian flags, in defiance of Ben-Gvir's call for the police to crack down.

This points to the possible emergence of a new axis of struggle, cutting across the carefully cultivated divisions between Arab and Jewish workers.

Media reports sought a measure of comfort in identifying the protest as largely mobilising the secular Israeli middle class and being led by the tame opposition parties. But this tells only half the story.

The new government is dragging Israel into the blackest forms of political reaction, including war against the Palestinians. It does so under conditions where Israel is a social and political powder keg and the entire Middle East has been destabilised by the deepening global economic crisis, the pandemic and US-led plans to widen the war against Russia in Ukraine into open hostilities against Russia's regional ally, Iran, with Israel as its chief attack dog.

The Tel Aviv rally was addressed by figures such as former Defence Minister Benny Ganz, retired Supreme Court President Ayala Procaccia, former Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, Labor Party chairwoman Merav Michaeli and the leader of the Arab Ra'am Party Mansour Abbas. But these figures, associated with the previous "government of change," are all massively discredited by that government's implementation of a right-wing agenda of austerity and war. This led *Haaretz* columnist Anshel Pfeffer to caution that "this protest still has no leader... The anger against the new government still has to grow, but there was plenty of rancor to be heard around the square from the leaders and activists of left-wing groups..."

Yaakov Katz, writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, warned the opposition against the dangers of provoking a civil war. He wrote: "Talk of a civil war is dangerous. Israel is on the eve of its 75th anniversary and the thought that this latest experiment in Jewish sovereignty in thousands of years will be in jeopardy because of internal discord should shake us all at our core.

"Yes, the issues that are being brought up are significant, and the consequences are potentially dire. But we must not take this state for granted. We must protect it, and yes, we must also fight for it."

Given the gravity of the situation, pro-imperialist commentators have appealed for some form of intervention from the US and European powers to curb Netanyahu. Thomas L. Friedman in the January 17 *New York Times* pleads with President Biden, "You may be the only one able to stop Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his extremist coalition from turning Israel into an illiberal bastion of zealotry," adding that, "I fear that Israel is approaching some serious internal civil strife."

This, he says, "has direct implications for US national security interests. I have no illusions that Biden can reverse the most extreme trends emerging in Israel today, but he

can nudge things onto a healthier path, and maybe prevent the worst, with some tough love in a way that no other outsider can.”

Simon Tisdall, writing for similar purposes in the *Guardian*, warns, “By endangering western public support for the state of Israel, undermining its democracy and confounding its alliances, Netanyahu and his hate-mongering cronies show themselves to be their country’s own worst enemies.” But he is forced to acknowledge the reality that Netanyahu can only proceed with his offensive because “the response to this alarming, destabilising development from Israel’s western allies has been strangely muted...”

He notes that “so far, the US has eschewed overt criticism,” a “shamefully supine approach” also being pursued by the European Union and Britain. Added to this is the shift by the region’s authoritarian Arab regimes towards openly friendly relations with Israel.

The imperialists and the Middle East’s regional powers are united against any challenge to the Israeli government because of their own crisis. They all need to suppress rising social and political opposition to their shared agenda of ever more grotesque enrichment of the financial oligarchy at the direct expense of the workers and oppressed masses, and the drive to imperialist wars of conquest and global hegemony against Russia, China and smaller regimes including Iran and Syria.

The eruption of mass opposition in Israel, for example, coincides with the el-Sisi regime in Egypt passing 38 life sentences against those involved in the 2019 anti-government protests, under conditions of a near meltdown of the economy and rising social discontent. It follows the months-long anti-government protests in Iran.

The mass protests in Israel will change the political climate the world over—just as did the abortive Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.

The denunciations of Netanyahu and his fascist allies by tens of thousands of Israeli demonstrators have given the lie to the global campaign slandering and witch-hunting opponents of Israel’s repression of the Palestinians as anti-Semites—a filthy lie that has seen thousands driven out of Britain’s Labour Party, and numerous academics, artists and political activists victimised in the US and Europe. If they are “anti-Semites,” then so too are hundreds of thousands of Israel’s own citizens!

Conversely, the protests are a powerful refutation of the central tenet of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Campaign, which treats all Israelis as if they share responsibility for the crimes of their government.

The Zionist project of establishing a Jewish state through the violent dispossession of the Arab population has led inexorably to the creation of an apartheid-style regime built on mass repression.

The events in Tel Aviv are the harbinger of a new upsurge of the working class, not just against this state, but throughout the region and internationally. It confirms the perspective fought for historically by the Fourth International, led today by the International Committee, of uniting Jewish and Arab workers in a common struggle to overthrow the Zionist state and the Arab bourgeois regimes through the building of a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

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