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Mass protests grow against Israel's far-right government

The third round of mass protests against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to give his fascistic government absolute powers and neuter the judicial system saw increased numbers of people participating across Israel's main cities.

Around 120,000 people took part in demonstrations in Tel Aviv Saturday evening, including several thousand attending one called by the Jewish-Arab activist group Standing Together. At least 7,000 rallied opposite the President's Residence in Jerusalem, more than 6,000 in Haifa, 1,500 in Be'er Sheva and hundreds in Herzliya and Rosh Pina.



Israelis carry torches at a protest against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his his far-right government that his opponents say threaten democracy and freedoms, in Tel Aviv, Israel, Saturday, Jan. 21, 2023. [AP Photo/Tsafrir Abayov]

The numbers testify to the anger and concern over the trajectory of the most right-wing government in Israel's history that took power at the end of last year. However, the leading lights of the former "government of change" and its supporters are seeking to maintain control of the movement, prioritizing the government's plans to weaken the High Court over other broader social, economic and political issues that are also animating the movement.

The new government, made up of Netanyahu's Likud party, the fascistic and racist parties Religious Zionism, Jewish Power and Noam, and the reactionary religious parties Shas and United Torah Judaism, is committed to Jewish supremacy and apartheid rule as embodied in the 2018 Jewish Nation-State Law. This includes the permanent seizure of the Palestinian territories; Jewish prayer at the al-Aqsa Mosque; the rollback of already circumscribed 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.

The economic costs of implementing such an agenda mean the gutting of education, health and what remains of Israel's public services, under conditions where 21 percent of the population live in poverty and 28 percent of children suffer from food insecurity.

Implementing this agenda is bound up with Justice Minister Yariv Levin's plans to curtail the High Court's ability to strike down laws and allow parliament to override any such rulings. As well as appointing judges, the government would abolish the post of attorney general. This would pave the way to end Netanyahu's trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases and the prospect of a lengthy prison sentence. More importantly, it would speed up settlement construction in preparation for annexing much of the West Bank.

The protest movement opposing the government's power grab is led by the same forces that led the 2020-21 Saturday evening protests against the previous Netanyahu government under the slogan "Anyone but Bibi", following his indictment. The beneficiaries of that movement were Israel's misnamed "government of change" that was largely made up of ministers that at one time or another had served under Netanyahu. It continued seamlessly Netanyahu's policies of expanding the settlements in the West Bank, suppressing Palestinian opposition to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, lifting all remaining measures aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus and placing the full burden of the costs of these policies and the impact of global inflation on the working class.

With no political vehicle to provide a progressive solution to the crisis, Israel's far-right forces—like their counterparts elsewhere—were able to take advantage of the political vacuum and help Netanyahu return to power with a 64-seat majority in the 120-seat Knesset, ending years of fragile majority rule.

An array of speakers associated with the opposition bloc, led by former Prime Minister Yair Lapid, addressed the main Tel Aviv rally. Lapid, who attended the protests for the first time, focused on defending Israel's reputation and its democratic pretensions and said nothing about the broader social questions animating the protests.

He said, "What you see here today is a demonstration in favour of the state. People who love the country have come to defend its democracy, its courts, the idea of a common life and a common good." Other speakers included the former Likud Defence Minister and army chief of staff Moshe Ya'alon and the international prizewinning Israeli novelist David Grossman.

Senior executives in Israel's high-tech industry have declared their support for a one hour "warning strike" Tuesday morning amid warnings by two former governors of the Bank of Israel that the government's efforts to weaken the Israeli judicial system "could deal a severe blow to Israel's economy and its citizens." It followed warnings by Maxim Rybnikov of Standard & Poor's that the government's plans could jeopardize Israel's credit rating and deter investment.

The rally was dominated by Israel's more affluent, secular layers carrying the national flag. People carried banners such as "Criminal Government" and "The End of Democracy", "Our Children will not Live in a Dictatorship" and "Israel, We Have A Problem." and handwritten placards reading "No to dictatorship."

But others expressed broader concerns. Noya Matalon, 24, a law student at Tel Aviv University, told the *Guardian*, "The last big protest movement in Israel was about taking Netanyahu down, but it's not a matter of right and left any more. Everyone – Arabs, Jews, even people who agree we need some reforms to the judicial system – everyone is saying they are scared."

Musician Ollie Danon said, "I believe the supreme court does need reform. Its rulings usually support the occupation [of the Palestinian territories], and somehow now it's the left wing who are out protesting to defend it. It's all absurd."

As the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) pointed out, the planned changes to the judicial system, including limiting the right of public petitioners to appeal to the High Court against infringements of human rights and the enactment of an override clause, would

seriously affect hundreds of organisations defending vulnerable groups. The fascistic forces in Netanyahu's government have railed against such groups, branding them as "dangerous and hostile," declaring human rights groups an "existential threat to Israel."

Educators and education chiefs in local government have declared their refusal to cooperate with the educational program department, now under the direction of the homophobic Noam minister Avi Maoz—with 170 mayors and council leaders refusing to implement the government's decision to fund ultra-Orthodox schools.

In Jerusalem, where more than a third of its near one million residents are Palestinian and two thirds of the remainder are religious or right-wing Jewish Israelis, at least 7,000 rallied opposite the President's Residence. *Ha'aretz* reported the presence of many supporters of the residents of Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighbourhood in East Jerusalem who are threatened with eviction. They held placards in Hebrew and Arabic to highlight the fact that the struggle for Israeli democracy is bound up with the struggle against Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, illegally occupied—and annexed in the case of East Jerusalem—since the 1967 Arab Israeli war.

The protest's organisers, Bayit Meshutaf (Shared Home), built the Jerusalem rally on the slogan "Right and left against destruction—protecting our shared home," inviting speakers from Netanyahu's Likud Party, the opposition bloc, as well as liberal activists.

Netanyahu has no intention of backing down as the conflict between his government and the court escalates. On Wednesday, Netanyahu and his far-right allies were enraged when the High Court accepted petitions and disqualified his appointment of Shas leader Arie Dery to head the Health and Interior Ministries. The court branded it "unreasonable" and unconstitutional given Dery's three criminal convictions, including a prison sentence, last year's guilty plea to tax evasion and his pledge to withdraw from public life as part of that plea bargain.

Netanyahu was forced to fire Dery. But describing him as an "anchor of experience, intelligence and responsibility," he told Dery, "The High Court decision ignores the will of the nation, and I am intending to find every possible legal means to allow you to contribute to the country."

On Friday, Defence Minister and Likud member Yoav Galant ordered the removal of the unauthorized Or Haim outpost in the West Bank, after Netanyahu backed its eviction as a token concession to US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan who was visiting Israel. Sullivan's visit came days before Washington and Tel Aviv launched their largest ever joint military exercise, put together with unprecedented speed in just two months. It was

designed to send a warning to Iran and underscore the Biden administration's commitment to Israel, despite the new government's fascistic character. The joint exercise, named Juniper Oak, includes 100 US aircraft with fighters, bombers and refueling aircraft flying in unison with 42 Israeli aircraft, as well as the USS George H. W. Bush carrier strike group.

Israeli and Palestinian workers should place no trust in the capitalist politicians seeking to control the protest movement. The decisive question is the forging of a revolutionary leadership to secure the political independence of the working class, in an implacable struggle against all those forces that seek to maintain the grip of one or other wing of the ruling elite, unifying the struggle of Israeli and Palestinian workers with those of their brothers and sisters in the region—Arab, Iranian, Kurdish and Turkish—and in the imperialist centres, against capitalism and for socialism. This is the perspective of permanent revolution fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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