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Israel protests to continue despite Netanyahu's “pause” of dictatorial legislation

Protests are continuing in Israel, in the largest display of popular opposition in the country's history.

Demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands, of a population of just over nine million, have been held for the last 12 weeks against the far-right government of Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to stage a coup against the judiciary. His plans, pursued alongside his fascistic coalition partners, are part of a broader project to dramatically escalate the Israeli state's persecution of the Palestinians, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and to clamp down on growing social and political opposition in the Israeli working class.



Police uses water cannon to disperse anti government protesters in Tel Aviv, Israel, Monday, March 27, 2023. Over Sunday and Monday up to 600,000 people turned out to protest and strikes spread across all sectors, closing universities, grounding flights and shutting ports. [AP Photo/Oded Balilty]

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The protests reached a new peak of intensity Sunday night and Monday, after Netanyahu's firing of defence minister Yoav Gallant. Up to 600,000 people turned out to protest and strikes spread across all sectors, closing universities, grounding flights and shutting ports. Late Monday evening, 10 hours after he was originally scheduled to make a statement, Netanyahu announced that the legislation would be "paused" to prevent "civil war". But he did so only after negotiations with the far-right parties in his government, granting them a National Guard controlled by the interior ministry, led by Jewish supremacist Itamar Ben-Gvir.

President of Israel Isaac Herzog and the umbrella organisation of most of the country's trade unions Histadrut used the "pause" to intervene to prop up the government.

Herzog issued a statement which began, "Stopping the legislation is the right thing. This is the time to begin a sincere, serious, and responsible dialogue that will urgently calm the waters and lower the flames."

It concluded, "The President's Residence, the People's Home, is a space for dialogue and the formation of as broad agreements as possible, with the aim of extracting our beloved State of Israel from the deep crisis that we are in."

On Tuesday, Herzog hosted talks between representatives of Netanyahu's coalition and of opposition parties Yesh Atid and National Unity.

Arnon Bar-David, chairman of Histadrut, had been forced to sanction a general strike Monday as workers all over the country began taking action independently. He did so with the aim of stopping "the madness across the country," saying "employers and workers" would "join hands together" to do so. After Netanyahu's statement, he declared the strike cancelled.

But protestors have not been swayed. Many have pointed to the fact that the ruling coalition tabled on Tuesday a final reading of a bill giving Netanyahu greater control of the selection of judges.

Demonstrators out in the streets in Tel-Aviv Monday night were attacked by police with water cannon and dozens of stun grenades. Thirty-eight protestors were arrested. One was hurt by a police horse and another by a police grenade.

A participant told *Haaretz* that she saw the man being hit: "I saw a man lying, bleeding, who suddenly fell in front of me on the floor after a loud boom. It was scary, I've been shaking."

The Umbrella Movement of Resistance against Dictatorship described the prime minister's announcement as "another attempt of Netanyahu trying to gaslight the Israeli

public in order to weaken to the protest movement in order to enact a dictatorship,” adding, “We will not stop the protest until the judicial coup is completely stopped.”

More rallies are planned for Thursday and Saturday, with *Al-Jazeera*'s Bernard Smith reporting, “Organisers said [former prime minister] Benny Gantz and [opposition leader] Yair Lapid don't represent them, they want people to still come out and protest until this law is completely abandoned.”

The line of the protests so far has been to criticise Netanyahu for destabilising the Israeli state. Palestinians have been effectively excluded.

Gantz and Lapid have been essentially arguing that the government is unnecessarily compromising the image of the Zionist project when the courts are no real block to their shared programme of apartheid and occupation. If Netanyahu were prepared to modify his agenda, they would happily order the protests dismissed and join in the denunciations of those who stayed out on the streets.

Lapid responded to the prime minister's statement Monday evening by saying he would be “willing to enter discussions if legislation is truly halted,” his only condition being that “there's no trick, only if the legislation will be truly stopped.”

Gantz spoke with Netanyahu Monday evening, welcoming his announcement and urging him to keep Gallant in position—saying it was “essential for national security and to calm tensions at this time,” according to *Haaretz*.

Aides of Gallant claim that he has received no formal notification of his dismissal, with spokespeople for Netanyahu and his Likud party refusing to comment. The former general is an unindicted war criminal, head of Southern Command for the Israel Defense Forces during Operation Cast Lead, the murderous 2008-9 assault on Gaza.

But whatever the intentions of Lapid, Gantz and the rest, the split in Zionist forces is an expression of a deeper crisis of the Israeli state and world capitalism which has blown apart the myth of a common Jewish people unaffected by the deep class divides and social tensions which scar the country. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote Monday, it has “brought Jewish workers and youth face to face with the historical necessity of a political reckoning with Zionism.”

Al-Jazeera, based in Qatar and generally dismissive of the protests like all Arab nationalist commentators, published an article Monday drawing attention to the growing dissent among Israel army reservists—cited by Gallant as a reason for his opposition to Netanyahu's judicial coup.

Tal Sagi, a member of the Breaking the Silence group of ex-soldiers (Israel drafts 18-year-olds for at least two years) which collects testimony from military occupations in the Occupied Territories, told how “the anti-occupation bloc has felt growing acceptance from other anti-judicial reform protesters as the protests progressed over the past months, particularly since the pogrom in Huwara,” in *Al-Jazeera*’s words.

Sagi explained, “At first, in the anti-occupation bloc, there were a lot of attacks on people who held Palestinian flags. Now I see less and less violence. It’s like the protest became more comfortable with the fact of the flag’s presence.”

Another anti-occupation protester, Jacob Abolafia, told the broadcaster, “Over the course of three months, and especially after the pogrom in Huwara, the consciousness is growing that what is going on in the occupation, the occupied territories and the Israeli streets are tied.

“You would hear at least 10,000 people chant: ‘Where were you at Huwara?’”

While Netanyahu and his coalition play for time, they are mobilising far-right forces like those who rampaged through Huwara to intimidate protesters.

Likud distributed a poster through WhatsApp groups on Monday calling on supporters “Emergency—Going up to Jerusalem! They won’t steal our election!” and providing details of transport available across the country. Hevron Regional Council, representing 10,000 settlers in the West Bank, funded busses to Jerusalem.

WhatsApp and Telegram groups of fascist organisations like The Unapologetic Right, the Jewish Defence League and La Familia, football ultras linked with Beitar Jerusalem, circulated calls to “run them [anti-Netanyahu protestors] over with a jeep”, bring “gasoline, explosives, tractors, guns, knives” and attack “these shits... blocking the road. We will keep them in their kibbutz.”

At the far-right rally, the fascistic Finance Minister Bezalal Smotrich told protestors, “The left has taken over the centres of power of Israel. The time has come for us to return the country to the nation.” Ben-Gvir added, “We are a right-wing government, and we will demand the reform now.”

Demonstrators chanted “treacherous leftists” and threw objects including flag poles at anti-Netanyahu protestors. Journalists for *Channel 13 News* and *Walla News* were spat at and assaulted with sticks. One suffered a broken rib. A Palestinian taxi driver was also attacked, escaping in his car.

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