

Israel: Gantz paves way for national unity government with Netanyahu

Jean Shaoul
28 March 2020

Blue and White opposition leader and former Israel Defence Forces (IDF) chief of staff Bennie Gantz is to join a “national emergency government” under the premiership of indicted criminal Benjamin Netanyahu.

The new government’s ostensible brief is to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.

Gantz cited “unusual times” to declare, “That is why I intend to explore the formation of an emergency unity government.”

His move signifies an agreement among Israel’s politicians to impose a dictatorial regime on both the Israeli and Palestinian working class that would drive down wages and living conditions in an untrammelled pursuit of profit.

The national emergency government is trailed by Gantz’s surprise election to the post of Knesset Speaker Thursday evening, replacing Yuli Edelstein and reconvening the Knesset, shuttered by Edelstein’s political manoeuvres in support of Netanyahu. The move was supported by Netanyahu’s Likud Party and some of Gantz’s Blue and White alliance.

It is assumed that Netanyahu would serve as prime minister until September 2021 when he would hand over to Gantz, who would serve in the interim as foreign minister while Gabi Ashkenazi, another former IDF chief of staff and Blue and White member, would serve as defence minister, with Blue and White members holding the justice and communications portfolios.

Gantz had initially, following Israel’s third inconclusive election in less than a year, rejected Netanyahu’s attempt to form a “national emergency government” under his leadership and accepted President Reuven Rivlin’s mandate to form a government. But any such government would be dependent upon the support of the third largest party, the Arab Joint List.

This was anathema for Netanyahu, his fascistic allies, Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the nationalist Yisrael

Beiteinu (Israel is our Home) and opponent of Netanyahu and some of Gantz’s own bloc. They whipped up a ferocious media campaign, branding the Arab legislators as “terrorists in suits.”

Without support for a minority government dependent on the Joint List, Gantz joined forces with Netanyahu, despite having fought three election campaign on the banner of “anyone but Bibi [Netanyahu’s nickname].” Having few substantive differences with Netanyahu, his shift was always on the cards.

This has led to a split within Blue and White’s ranks, with Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid faction and Moshe Ya’alon of the Telem faction, both of whom have served in Netanyahu’s governments, refusing to join a national emergency government. Lapid and Ya’alon will keep the Blue and White name, while Gantz’s faction of 17 members will revert back to Israeli Resilience Party.

Lapid, who will serve as the leader of the opposition, declared, “Gantz stole the votes of the people who voted for him when he vowed not to serve under Netanyahu; he caved into Bibi without a fight.” Ahmad Tibi from the Joint List told *Middle East Eye*, “We backed him [Gantz] to bring about a change after years of incitement against Arabs by Bibi... Corona pandemic is bad enough. To use corona for political gain is even worse.”

What remains of Israel’s nominal left parties, Labour and Meretz, which played a crucial role in backing Gantz, have been thoroughly discredited.

Gantz’s agreement to join Netanyahu comes amid an escalating social and economic crisis. By Friday morning, there were 3,035 confirmed cases of coronavirus. Ten people have died, and 49 are in serious condition. Several weeks ago, with Israel’s healthcare system, eviscerated by years of budget cuts, ill-equipped to cope with the pandemic, Netanyahu ordered stay-at-home measures and shuttered schools, universities and businesses.

Some 21 percent of workers are now jobless, up from

17 percent just a few days ago and 3.6 percent in February. Nearly 40 percent of Tel Aviv's tenants (46 percent of all the city's residents rent their home) are unable to pay next month's rent, with another 30 percent saying that within a few months they too won't be able to pay.

In anticipation of social unrest, Netanyahu has authorised widespread surveillance powers—routinely used against the Palestinians in the occupied territories—to trace via their cell phones Israeli citizens who have been in contact with coronavirus patients. Such powers for Shin Bet, Israel's domestic spy agency, will become part and parcel of the state's surveillance apparatus.

Netanyahu's scurrilous political manoeuvres have provoked black flag motorcade protests, a large online anti-government virtual protest broadcast over Facebook and a week-long teachers' strike over an attempt to cut their pay as they moved to distance learning for school children.

On Wednesday, he tightened restrictions, banning all except essential workers from moving more than 100 metres from their homes unless taking part in approved activities such as purchasing food and medicine, and closing all places of worship. Violations will be subject to fines of upwards of NIS 500 (\$125) and even imprisonment.

A total lockdown was likely, Netanyahu warned, stating that government-commissioned estimates calculate that 10,000 of Israel's 9 million population may die due to the coronavirus and 25,000 under the worst-case scenario.

According to a military spokesperson, the government is set to deploy 500 armed soldiers, starting Sunday, as a first step toward a full national lockdown involving an additional 2,000-3,000 troops.

The Palestinian Authority (PA), which controls parts of the occupied West Bank, reported the first death from coronavirus on Wednesday—a 60-year-old female with serious health challenges. There are over 80 confirmed cases in the West Bank, mostly in Bethlehem, and around 10 in Gaza, undoubtedly a gross underestimate as the Palestinians have few testing kits. On Thursday, the World Health Organisation (WHO) sent more than 3,000 test kits and 50,000 surgical masks to the PA.

While the PA has issued shelter-at-home orders, Israel is preparing to close their checkpoints, locking down many Palestinian towns and cities in the West Bank and preventing around 120,000 Palestinians travelling to work in Israel. Earlier, the government had announced that it would allow the Palestinians to continue working in

Israel, provided they remained there for at least three months in employer-provided lodgings.

Last week, a video went viral on social media showing Israeli security forces dumping a Palestinian at the checkpoint near the occupied West Bank city of Nablus, where he collapsed. His employer had taken him to hospital to be tested for the virus after he fell ill with flu-like symptoms. Even before the result was known, police officers arrived and took him away in handcuffs.

Internal Security Minister Gilad Erdan released 500 Israeli prisoners into house arrest on March 20 to reduce the risk of a coronavirus outbreak in the country's prisons, but refused to release any of the 5,000 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, including 180 children, 43 women and 430 detained with neither charge nor trial—even those with critical health conditions. At least four Palestinians have tested positive in prisons that are notoriously overcrowded.

The Israel Prison Service has banned visits to Palestinian prisoners by family members and lawyers since the outbreak of the virus. Last week, prisoners began refusing some meals as a prelude to a full-scale hunger strike if measures to protect them were not implemented. On Wednesday, a prisoner set fire to his cell in Nafha Prison in protest.

UN Special Rapporteur for the situation of human rights in Palestine, Michael Lynk, pointed out that official Israeli publications to increase awareness about the disease were issued “exclusively in Hebrew,” even though Arabic is an official language spoken by Israel's 1.8 million Arab citizens and many Jewish Israelis.

On Thursday, it was announced that the government had opened up a nuclear bunker, the “National Management Centre,” replete with living quarters and command facilities accessible from the government complex in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, as a base to coordinate its plans should the situation worsen.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact