

Benjamin Netanyahu accused of dictatorship amid coronavirus crisis



Jerusalem, March 23 (RHC)-- Hundreds of people defied restrictions on large gatherings in Israel to protest outside the parliament as they accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government of exploiting the coronavirus crisis to solidify his power and undermine Israel's democratic foundations.

In recent days, Netanyahu and his surrogates have shut down Israel's court system in advance of his trial on corruption charges, have begun using phone-surveillance technology on the public, and adjourned parliament until next week.

Netanyahu has defended most of these moves as unpleasant, but necessary steps to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. More than 500 cases have been confirmed in Israel, with no deaths. Opponents say he is more interested in staying in power as Netanyahu governs in a caretaker role after a third consecutive inconclusive election in less than a year.

Netanyahu tightened a national stay-at home policy, announcing guidelines aimed at halting the spread of the coronavirus would now be enforced by police under emergency orders. "Under these orders, you, Israel's citizens, are required to stay at home. It is no longer a request, it is not a recommendation, it is an

obligatory directive that will be enforced by enforcement authorities," Netanyahu said in a televised address.

The measures stopped short of a total national lockdown. Netanyahu said Israelis would still be allowed to shop for food and medicine, and some workers would be exempted from the restrictions. Israel's health ministry has reported 573 confirmed cases of coronavirus infection. Forty-seven cases have been reported among Palestinians in the occupied West Bank.

Outside the Knesset, or parliament, on Thursday hundreds protested against the government's moves, hoisting banners that said "No to dictatorship", "Democracy in danger" and calling Netanyahu the "Crime Minister."

Police said they arrested three people for violating a ban on gatherings of more than 10 people. They also blocked a convoy of dozens of cars from entering Jerusalem and prevented dozens of other cars inside Jerusalem from approaching the Knesset building. Many of the cars honked and hung black flags out of their windows.

Police rejected accusations they were carrying out Netanyahu's bidding, saying they were following health ministry orders meant to curb the spread of the virus. "No one is above the law or above public health orders released by the ministry of health," they said.

At the nearby Supreme Court, justices heard separate challenges to the new mobile-phone tracking edict and the shutdown of the Knesset. Civil rights groups and the opposition Blue and White party filed the cases. Netanyahu announced this week that Israel's Shin Bet security agency would begin deploying its phone surveillance technology to help curb the spread of the coronavirus in Israel by tracking the moves of those infected.

The order went into effect late on Wednesday when the government said it had notified about 400 people they had come into contact with infected people and should immediately quarantine themselves. The surveillance has sparked widespread criticism from the opposition and rights groups, calling it a "dangerous precedent."

Israel is in the process of forming a new government following months of uncertainty and three inconclusive elections, the latest of which took place on March 2nd. Parliament has been sitting since Monday, when Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz received the mandate to form a new government.

But Israel's parliamentary speaker, Yuli Edelstein, a member of Netanyahu's conservative Likud party, dismissed the Knesset early on Wednesday, after Israel banned gatherings of more than 10 people in a bid to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

By dismissing the chamber early, Edelstein ignored a letter signed by 61 parliamentarians calling for the vote to elect his replacement, a move critics slammed as anti-democratic. The courts have also been shut down and Netanyahu's corruption trial postponed until May, according to a decree, citing the coronavirus.

In a video statement, Yair Lapid, a senior figure in Blue and White, told Israeli citizens that they "no longer live in a democracy." "There is no judicial branch in Israel. There is no legislative branch in Israel. There is only an unelected government that is headed by a person who lost the election. You can call that by a lot of names. It isn't a democracy," he said in a recorded video.



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