

Mass protest led by Druze against Israel's Nation State law

By Jean Shaoul
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Tens of thousands of Israelis, waving Druze and Israeli flags and calling for equality, gathered in Rabin Square in downtown Tel Aviv Saturday to demonstrate against the Nation State Law that enshrines Jewish supremacy.

The Druze are angered by being rendered second-class citizens.

The demonstration was reported to be around 150,000 strong, making it the largest-ever Druze rally. Dozens of protesters also demonstrated outside Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon's house in the northern city of Haifa.

The Druze are a minority Muslim sect, numbering around 120,000 in Israel, less than 2 percent of its population, but with larger Druze communities in neighbouring Lebanon and Syria.

Unlike other Palestinian Israelis, who along with the Circassian community and the Bedouin form 21 percent of Israel's nine million population and are exempt from military service, the Druze serve in the Israel Defense Forces, Border Police and the Civil Administration and are active participants in the government and media, with some rising to high positions.

The Nation State law enshrines Israel as “the national home of the Jewish people,” declaring that “the right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.” It includes Jews not just in Israel but throughout the diaspora who have automatic right to immigration and citizenship, and proclaims Jerusalem “complete and united” as Israel's capital.

It sanctions the apartheid-style exclusion of Arabs from exclusively Jewish communities, declaring, “The state views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value and will act to encourage and promote

its establishment and consolidation.” It demotes Arabic from its position as an official state language and gives official and exclusive standing to Jewish symbols, including declaring “Hatikva” the national anthem. It prevents Palestinians from getting Israeli citizenship by marrying Israelis and future asylum seekers from entering Israel.

The law makes no mention of Israel's non-Jewish citizens, democracy or equality and has sparked widespread criticism from Israel's Palestinian citizens, opposition parties and Jewish groups abroad. Criticism from the Druze—despite their small numbers—is significant because of their previous stalwart support for the Israeli state. Since the law's enactment on July 19, several Druze IDF officers have said they will resign their commissions in protest, while Zuheir Bahloul, a Palestinian Israeli legislator, has resigned his seat.

The demonstration comes after weeks of protest from the Druze minority and others. Palestinian leaders in Israel have petitioned the High Court over the new law, saying it is “racist, colonialist, and illegitimate” because it denies the civil and national rights of Palestinians in their homeland.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who pushed for the legislation, has refused repeatedly to amend the law. But trying to appease the Druze, he outlined new measures to enshrine in law their special status within Israeli society, recognise their service to the state and increase funding for their villages.

This effort failed. Such is the anger among the Druze community that traditional religious leaders, headed by Sheikh Muwafak Tarif, whom successive Israeli governments have been able to rely on, refused to fall in line.

The protest rally was led primarily by senior Druze

leaders, mainly retired army officers and mayors, with speakers including Sheikh Tarif and the mayor of Yarka, Wahib Habish. It was, nevertheless, also directed against the traditional leadership. The banners, slogans and chants included, “We want equality” and “Yes to equality; no to bribery.”

While other Palestinian Israelis and Israeli Jews joined the rally, the platform made no broader appeal for unity against the government’s racist policies, its attacks on the social and economic conditions of Israeli workers or its non-stop war-mongering against Iran that threatens a wider conflagration in the Middle East.

Also attending were former generals from the IDF and retired chiefs of Israel’s spy agencies Mossad and Shin Bet, the Druze Brigadier General Amal As’ad, former Shin Bet heads Yuval Diskin and Ami Ayalon, Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai, and TV host and social commentator, Lucy Aharish.

They have stepped in to prevent the opposition to Netanyahu’s legislative program getting out of control, further resignations of senior officers or even rejection of military service altogether.

Diskin called the law an “abomination,” while Huldai said that the law was an “ugly stain” on Israel’s democracy and called for it to be cancelled or changed. Former Mossad chief Tamir Pardo called the new law an “injustice” to Israel’s Palestinian minority, especially the Druze.

Former IDF chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi, who attended the rally, said, “I’m here to tell them I’m with them, I’ve known them for decades, we have fought alongside each other, and have died together.”

IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot likewise sought to mollify the Druze’s anger, assuring them that the “camaraderie of soldiers with our Druze, Bedouin and other brothers from minority groups who serve in the IDF will continue to lead our path.”

The following day, Netanyahu adamantly defended the law, saying it was “vital” for ensuring that “Israel will remain the Jewish nation-state for generations to come.”

“Without the nation-state law, the future of Israel as the nation-state of the Jews cannot be guaranteed,” he said.

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan responded to the protests by accusing people with an anti-government political agenda of “stirring divisions”

in Israeli society over the new law, a reference to claims that the left was responsible for financing various protests, including the rally on Saturday night that was the result of deals made between Druze leaders and Labour Party activists. He reiterated the government’s lying refrain, “There is not a word in this law that hurts the Druze community or any other community.”

Israel’s open turn to racist politics signals the stepping up of attacks not just on the Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories, but also on the social and democratic rights of all workers.

Netanyahu is already cracking down on oppositional media and seeking to criminalize political dissent to his policies within Israel and beyond, working closely with the giant technology corporations PayPal, Facebook and Google to close down platforms that support Palestinian rights. Last December, an Israeli report stated that the Strategic Affairs Ministry had a budget of some \$70 million to “stand at the forefront of the battle against delegitimization, adopting methods from the fields of intelligence and technology.”

Israel is bitterly divided along class lines, with a poverty rate above 21 percent, the highest in the developed world. Recent months have seen a rise in working class protests and strikes, and the Netanyahu government is seeking to contain this movement and channel it behind a policy of anti-Arab racism and Jewish chauvinism.

A new upsurge of the working class is beginning, with nurses set to start an open-ended strike on Tuesday. This points the way forward for the masses of Jewish and Arab workers through a unified struggle to overthrow and replace the Zionist state and the Arab bourgeois regimes, and forge the United Socialist States of the Middle East.

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