Israel: COVID-19 Surge Puts Political Squeeze on Bibi

“With a gentleman I am always a gentleman and a half, and with a fraud I try to be a fraud and a half.” - Otto von Bismark, German Chancellor, 1871 –1890

July 10th found 10,000 protesters in Rabin Square angry over the delays in their promised coronavirus relief funding. Israel’s self-employed and small business owners seem to have found themselves at the end of the COVID-19 relief line and wanted to send Bibi a public message. Police had to break up the rally using pepper spray and even mounted police.

But that just poured the angry crowd out of the square where they began blocking streets. That is when the arrests began, with 19 going to jail for the evening and facing fines and court appearances to add to their financial troubles.

Unemployment is running at 21%, much more than in the US, with 850,000 Israelis out of work. Tel Aviv resident Ruti Arenfeld reported, “I’m here to call on the government to do what it has promised, to transfer the money to the private wage workers and small businesses,...you told them to close and they did that. Now it’s your turn to help them before it’s too late.”

While salaried workers were on semi-vacation and receiving unemployment, many others were left to spend down their savings and run up their charge cards. With the threat of looming new lockdowns, those who have yet to receive government assistance fear they will be ignored again, hence they have hit the streets.

“There is a very grave crisis of confidence between us and the government,” Shai Berman, one of the protest organizers, told Kan public radio earlier Saturday... “We are part of a large group of people which is feeling growing distress and wants to demonstrate, and simply does not believe the [government’s] promises.”

Rally turns into a big COVID-19 party

But the big rally of tightly packed demonstrators, while shouting and chanting all evening were raining COVID-19 droplets down from those infected all over the crowd for the whole event, making the Health Ministry rightly unhappy. Deputy minister Yoav Kisch called the protest a “health terror attack.”

That comment was followed by Health Minister Yuli Edleston’s filing a complaint against a doctor at Soroka hospital in Beersheba, Prof. Ruthy Shaco-Levy, head of the Israeli Pathologists Association. He had published on Facebook before the rally, “Whoever comes tonight to the protest and doesn’t want to enter a 14-day quarantine tomorrow, do yourself a favor and leave your phone at home.”

The race is on to control new outbreak

Like in the US, independent Israelis with lots of time on their hands were crowding onto the streets, cafes, bars and the beach, with many ignoring social distancing, inside and out. A similar situation developed in the US from in South Carolina, Florida and Texas, where young people on their extended summer break wanted to have their fun, thinking that COVID-19 was not really a threat to them.

But the new surge in the US has many hospitals claiming most of the sick are under 40 now. The same seems to be happening in Israel, where independent minded Israelis, from the ultra-orthodox to the young well to do want to enjoy life after being cooped up under lockdown.
The Israeli Health ministry is showing its flexibility to make changes in its contact tracing procedures, which earned Israel the reputation of having done well during the first round using the Shin Bet cell phone tracking system not only to track people down, but to be able to monitor their compliance.

Where it had been going back looking for contacts 14 days on confirmed cases, that will be reduced to 10 days now. But those contacts would be still be required to quarantine for 14 days. Friday evening the Ministry had reported over 1500 cases, sending Israel into round two of its coronavirus journey. Saturday followed with 1,148, and Sunday with 749 to total 18,940 infections in a country the size of a medium US state.

Bibi reacts to new Covid, economic protests

President Netanyahu is certainly no stranger to Israeli political turmoil and could be one of the best public anger lion tamers in Israeli history, at least on the front end of making promises. He blamed the delays on the bureaucratic problems but was promising a relief check in people’s back accounts by next Wednesday. If there is anything that Bibi is good at, it’s making promises.

His poll numbers are showing widespread disappointment with this handling of COVID-19 and the economic situation. On Friday he met with representatives of the angry groups for a three hour vetting, which was described as “positive” or “charged”, depending on which side you were on.

Bibi promised small businesses 6000 shekels every two months, and larger businesses up to 500,000. Salaried people would receive a vague “safety net” and expanded unemployment benefits, which is something the US must also address this month when the current enhanced benefits expire.

Blue and White battle with Bibi

The partnership Prime Ministership has been a roller coaster battle for Benny Gantz, who is in the political caboose on the Netanyahu train. Both are going head to head in a budget dispute, where Bibi wants a one year budget and Gantz wants a two year budget so that ministries, including his Defense ministry, can plan better plan further out.

Bibi, who loves playing the tough guy, has threatened to call for new elections if Gantz does not submit, with the unsaid caveat that if Bibi won, he could bail out of the joint PM arrangement with Gantz, revealing that Gantz should have negotiated that possibility better in his power sharing deal with Bibi the Fox.

To Bibi’s credit, his office released a statement over what was, in hindsight, opening up too soon, “I take responsibility for this step, and I take responsibility for fixing it.” As is often the case, that might be easier said than done.

Bibi puts his new elections gun on the table

Blue and White released a statement, “Netanyahu is pushing with all of his might toward elections, throwing money on citizens in order to break up the government from March,” the official was quoted by Channel 12 as saying, adding that “even the Haredim [Netanyahu’s ultra-Orthodox political allies] know Netanyahu’s pushing for elections.”

But Blue and White is not alone in being unhappy with Bibi’s one year budget approach. The Shas party leader Aryeh Deri had an unpleasant phone call with Netanyahu, which ended with his slamming the phone down over his threat to call for new elections, which nobody wants to go through during a pandemic, economic stress and uncertainly.

Effectively, Netanyahu is threatening the whole country and could be taking himself out onto a political minefield, much different than the kind Bibi is used to dealing with.

COVID-19 could be the end of Trump

As it stands now, Bibi is not in as bad shape as Trump, whose 67 percent negative poll ratings on his handling of COVID-19 are at an all time low. Huge numbers of Americans view his actions as childish and even a threat to the country.

With a growing number of states reporting record new infections, and their governors beginning new commercial restrictions, more hospitals are reporting edging near capacity for treating COVID-19 cases, like Arizona, and others are must win states for Trump in the November election.

Even the Republican convention in Tallahassee might need to be held outside if state and city officials rule it is too
irresponsible to jam all those people into a coliseum to rain COVID-19 down on each other, and then fly home to spread it around a little more.

It is going to be a long and politically hot summer, both for Bibi and Donald, and all the rest of us.

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