

Right-wing, ultra-Orthodox Parties Accused of Plotting 'Hostile Takeover' of Key Zionist Institutions

World Zionist Congress scheduled to vote Tuesday on agreement that would strip non-Orthodox movements and center-left parties of positions of power in institutions it controls

By Judy Maltz

The non-Orthodox Jewish movements are teaming up with the center-left parties in Israel in a last-ditch effort to prevent the takeover of key international Zionist institutions by right-wing and rigidly Orthodox political parties.

On Tuesday, the World Zionist Congress will be asked to approve an agreement that would effectively hand over control of key positions at the World Zionist Organization and its affiliate organizations – The Jewish Agency for Israel, Keren Hayesod and the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael in Hebrew) – to these parties.

The World Zionist Congress, which allocates about a billion dollars a year to Jewish causes and is popularly known as the “parliament of the Jewish people,” convenes every five years. The three-day session opening on Tuesday will be held online because of the coronavirus pandemic, rather than in Jerusalem, as is traditionally the case.

Among the 521 delegates who will be casting their votes at the Zionist congress, a narrow majority of 269 delegates are affiliated with the five right-wing and religious parties that drafted the controversial agreement.

It would therefore seem to be a done deal, but not exactly.

The World Zionist Congress has another 232 delegates who represent organizations that traditionally do not vote on senior institutional appointments. These “non-voting” organizations include B’nai Brith International, the Maccabi World Union, Hadassah, the Women’s International Zionist Organization and Na’amat (the latter three of which are women’s groups). Among their delegates, a clear majority align themselves with the non-Orthodox Jewish movements and the center-left parties in Israel.

The non-Orthodox Jewish movements, in collaboration with representatives of the center-left parties, plan to spend the early part of the week urging leaders of these organizations to break with past practice and exercise their right to vote on Tuesday to scuttle an agreement that they claim would strip them of any real influence in the major Zionist institutions.

“These organizations no longer have the luxury of sitting on the fence,” said Gusti Yehoshua Braverman, chair of the WZO Department for Diaspora Affairs and a representative of the Reform movement on its executive board. “These are organizations that get most of their support from Reform and Conservative Jews. They need to make their move and declare that this agreement is unacceptable.”

Under the terms of the agreement, the top job at the Jewish National Fund, the most powerful of the institutions, would be rotated between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and a coalition of Modern Orthodox parties. For the past five years, the position had been filled by a Labor Party appointee. Kahol Lavan – the new centrist party headed by Benny Gantz that is a key member of the current Israeli coalition government – had been hoping to gain control of it.

The Jewish National Fund controls billions of dollars' worth of land in Israel and is active in forestry, water and tourism projects. Under the draft agreement, Avraham Duvdevani, a member of the religious Zionist Mizrahi movement and the current chairman of the World Zionist Organization, would hold the position of JNF chairman for two years, and Likud Knesset member Haim Katz would hold it for three years. Katz was forced to resign his position as a cabinet minister last year following his indictment on charges of fraud and breach of trust.

Under the draft agreement, the Diaspora Affairs division of the WZO would also be handed over to Likud. According to sources with knowledge of the appointment, the leading candidate to replace Reform movement representative Yehoshua Braverman is Jack Kupfer, an ultra-right-wing French-born Jew who in a Facebook post three years ago referred to Israeli leftists as "traitors." He recently reportedly described the Palestinians as "a much more dangerous virus" than COVID-19.

One-third of the delegates to the World Zionist Congress are from Israel, with the number of seats allocated to each Israeli party derived from its representation in the Knesset. Another third of the delegates are from the United States, with the remainder from the rest of the world. The composition of the U.S. delegation is determined through elections.

In the last election, which was held online over the course of seven weeks earlier this year (the results of which were announced in late March), an ultra-Orthodox party running for the first time was the big winner – and the big surprise. Eretz Hakodesh ("The Holy Land") – which champions "traditional religious values and Jewish rights in the entire Land of Israel" (implying support for Israeli annexation of the West Bank) – emerged as the third largest party, garnering more than 15 percent of the total vote. Eretz Hakodesh made attacks against Reform Judaism the focus of its campaign.

Under the terms of the draft agreement, Eretz Hakodesh would be granted a new division in the World Zionist Organization dedicated to "ultra-Orthodox spiritual services." In addition, representatives of Eretz Hakodesh would fill two key positions in the JNF: deputy chairman and chairman of its education department. Shas, the ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi party, would also be given a new division in the WZO dedicated to promoting the heritage of Jews originating from North Africa and the Middle East.

It has been a matter of tradition that all parties and movements across the political and religious spectrum share power in the World Zionist Organization and its affiliated entities, as an expression of the diversity of the Jewish people. Leaders of the non-Orthodox movements and center-left parties say, however, that the draft agreement leaves them this time with mere "crumbs."

Although Kahol Lavan would be allowed, for example, to choose the chairperson of Keren Hayesod, according to its terms, the agreement stipulates that Prime Minister Netanyahu has the right to choose his own candidate for the job. In such a case, the agreement says, Kahol Lavan would be given an "alternative position" with an equivalent salary.

Prominent representatives of the non-Orthodox movements in Israel who asked not to be quoted by name described the agreement as "lunacy" and "a hostile takeover by the ultra-Orthodox and right-wing parties."

The Reform movement's Yehoshua Braverman said that "anyone who cares about Israel and wants to see it as the fulfillment of the vision of Theodor Herzl should not be sleeping at night over this agreement."

"Jews from around the world have always known that the WZO and its affiliate organizations welcomed a diversity of voices," she added. "If this agreement is passed, the message would be that Israel is only the homeland for Jews who think a certain way, and that is nothing less than a catastrophe."