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**INTRODUCTION**

More than a crisis that has sprung up suddenly, the current political upheaval in Israel has been slowly brewing, probably from the very day of the country’s inception, but certainly with more intensity since 1967, which was a crucial watershed for Israeli society.

What has been gradually forced to the surface is the tension between the two declared tenets of Israel’s articles of faith: of aspiring to be both Jewish and democratic; and the question of whether both can coexist in an extremely diverse Jewish community, while one-fifth of the population is not Jewish, and while for more than 56 years Israel has occupied Palestinian land and controlled millions of people in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Gaza against their will and with no end in sight.

It is too early to know who will emerge victorious, if anyone at all, in the ongoing clash between the most ultra-right, religious, messianic, corrupt, and anti-democratic Israeli government the country has ever seen, and the pro-democracy, popular movement which for more than six months has been protesting in the streets against the heavy-handed authoritarianism of the sixth government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

As the Knesset goes into recess for the summer, there is a clear stalemate between the two camps. On the one hand the protesters are gaining support and momentum among Israelis up and down the country, as well as from Israeli and Jewish communities around the world, while the international community is clear in its objection to the non-consensual constitutional overhaul being conducted by the ruling coalition.

On the other hand, the government has continued to cynically exploit its narrow parliamentary majority to pass legislation that clearly aims to weaken the judiciary and hand more power to the executive branch, namely the government itself. It is no exaggeration to argue that this is the most severe crisis in the history of Israeli politics, and one that threatens to lead to widespread civil disobedience, violence, and even implosion.

There is a tendency, in the heat of the justified struggle of the protest movement against a government that is attempting to weaken the democratic system, to forget that this democratic system has been a fragile one for a long time and has never served equally the country’s Palestinian minority as it has protected the rights of their Jewish neighbors.

Furthermore, Palestinians on the other side of the Green Line, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip, barely enjoy a fraction of the human, political, and civil rights that most Israelis are granted, and have had very little help from Israel’s courts, even though their lives are governed by Israel’s laws.

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nor of peace, he is also by nature a very cautious leader. For him the political system is a mere tool to preserve his stay in power indefinitely, and ever since his indictment on three counts – of fraud, bribery, and breach of trust – it has become an instrument for manipulating the political and judicial system to prevent his trial concluding with guilty verdicts.

Netanyahu is already the longest-serving prime minister in the country’s history, and has dominated its politics since he was first elected in 1996, having been at the helm for a total of nearly 16 years. For him to have now formed a governing coalition with parties that have clear ultra-right and religious ideologies — some of them quite repulsive in their racist, Jewish supremacist nature — while caving in to their budgetary and legislative demands, is already making the country more polarized, poorer, and more unfair on its march toward a theocracy, as it clashes with the Palestinians and creates friction with the international community.

For the first time in Israel’s history, European leaders have openly criticized domestic politics in the country, and US President Joe Biden is withholding an official invitation for a Netanyahu visit. This is hardly something that Netanyahu would have wished for, but he is prepared to go along with his ultra-right partners and defend their actions to save his own skin. The protesters also recognize that the Jewish state’s security and prosperity, as well as its close relations with the US and Europe, depend to a large extent on maintaining the Western-style liberal democracy that has been seriously jeopardized by the current government.

For the first time, these concerns are also being shared by many who supported Netanyahu’s Likud party as recently as last year’s general election, and who have now decided to join the protests. They realize that they have been duped into voting in a weak and dishonest leader who is willingly being held hostage by the ultra-extremists in his coalition, and that this can only end in even deeper divisions at home, with the most hard-line interpretations of Judaism and Zionism holding sway while diplomatic friction grows with the rest of the world.

The unique circumstances of Netanyahu’s corruption trial, and with it his own and his family’s state of mind, has only...
emphasized and exacerbated the existing condition of a deeply polarized society, exposing it in its full intensity.

The formation of the current government and its distorted platform has brought to the surface a whole raft of social-political cleavages: between those who believe in a true liberal democracy and those who harbor authoritarian tendencies; between the religious and the secular of all shades; between Jews and Arabs of center and periphery; between those who have benefited from the country’s rapid economic growth and those who have been left behind; between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews; and between those who believe in achieving peace and reconciliation with the Palestinians and those who believe in achieving a true liberal democracy and those who harbor authoritarian tendencies; between Jews and Arabs of center and periphery; between those who have benefited from the country’s rapid economic growth and those who have been left behind; between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews; and between those who believe in achieving peace and reconciliation with the Palestinians and those who believe in achieving peace and reconciliation with the Palestinians; and some segments of society that in the past were apolitical, perhaps apathetic, or even complacent, have now taken up to the fact that there is a real push for a judicial coup that will leave judges with little power to oversee the executive and legislative branches of government. The judiciary would be appointed by and become a servant of the politicians and their vested interests, and not of the public, to the detriment of good governance, let alone justice.

Those who join the demonstrations week in, week out fully understand that it is they – who guarantee the country’s security, who generate prosperity, pay taxes, provide public services including health and education, are active in civil society, and are part of the creative industries – who are about to be marginalized and will soon find it more difficult to operate freely and fairly without the protection of an independent judiciary, and who are currently ruled by those whose contribution to society is minimal, who do not serve in the military, who contribute almost nothing to the economy, but nonetheless make huge demands on the public purse.

For the first time in the country’s history reservists, whether serving as pilots, cybersecurity units, or other elite forces, have announced that they will not show up for service, as they refuse to volunteer and risk their lives for a dictatorial regime. Also, serving in the military of a country with no independent judiciary increases the risk that they may end up in front of an international war crimes tribunal.

Considering the Israel Defense Forces’ reliance on reservists to carry out a considerable proportion of its missions, this refusal to serve would compromise levels of military preparedness and the ability to accomplish its tasks.

In the meantime, the situation in the West Bank is moving closer to a full-blown confrontation, as clashes grow more frequent between the military and Palestinian armed groups compromised mainly of youth, who are resorting to the armed struggle due to the lack of any political horizon and are frustrated by seeing settlements expanding, Palestinian land lost, and rampant, unchecked settler violence aided by a tailwind from those coalition members who represent the distorted ideology of Jewish supremacy. And all this at a time when the Palestinian political system itself is in complete disarray.

Consequently, a two-state solution remains a remote possibility, which also risks the normalization and peace agreements Israel recently reached with several countries in the region as well as any future agreements with others.

There is no easy way out of the current political deadlock in Israel, but the progressive forces in the country cannot afford to lose this battle if they wish to preserve the values and privileges that come with living in a democratic system. Hence, there must be no let-up in their protests, and no serving a government that is attempting to lead them toward authoritarianism. Otherwise, the country will change beyond recognition, all its achievements both domestic and international will be compromised, and many will simply pack up and leave.