

Israeli society at a watershed



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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 sight¹.

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



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (L) greets National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, during a media briefing ahead of a vote on the national budget at the parliament in Jerusalem. AFP

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



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Israeli machinery demolish a Palestinian house in the Arab east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Silwan. Israeli authorities regularly raze homes built by Palestinians in east Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank if they lack Israeli construction permits. AFP

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 implosion².

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 neighbors³.

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 and determined by Israel⁴.

But for tactical reasons, and although very artificially, the leaders of the pro-democracy movement have chosen to ignore the link

between the Palestinian issue and the erosion of Israel's democracy, for fear that this might lose them the support of the soft-right⁵.

The protest also seldom points at the connection between the dire situation of Israel's Arab-Palestinian minority, which has been discriminated against and neglected ever since the founding of the state of Israel, and the fragility of the country's democracy. This is at a time when crime rates, especially of homicide, are reaching unprecedented levels, while Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir controls the police force, and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich is holding back previously approved budgets intended to improve the living conditions of Palestinian-Israelis⁶.

When examining the current unrest in Israel, the role of Netanyahu cannot be ignored. His unscrupulous attempts to escape justice after being indicted on three cases of corruption have played a major part in bringing this extremist government into power in the first place, and since then he has given it a license to embark on an open assault on the independence of the judicial system, in a clear attempt to compromise the checks and balances mechanism without which Israel is a democracy by name only⁷.

However, while Netanyahu is neither a champion of the notion of liberal democracy,



Left: Ultra-Orthodox Jews gather at the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in Meron, Israel, for the annual Lag BaOmer pilgrimage. In 2021, a stampede at the site killed 45 people.
Right: Demonstrators march to protest a proposed bill that would overhaul the country's judicial system, which opponents say threatens the country's democracy. AFP

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 years⁸. For him to have now formed a governing coalition with parties that have clear ultra-right and religious ideologies⁹ — 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.

In the twilight of his political career, with the very real prospect of it ending with conviction and jail, and with every other



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party with a semblance of integrity and adherence to the rule of law declaring that they will not share power with a defendant in a corruption trial, he is putting his own interest first and that of the country last.

It is the distorted view of democracy held by the coalition members, their greed, their intention to grab whatever they can with complete disregard for good governance, and the vitriolic language they direct at everything that is sacrosanct for liberal-minded Israelis, that has brought hundreds of thousands of these Israelis onto the streets.

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 government¹⁰.

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 world¹¹.

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 based on a two-state solution, and those who wish to continue the occupation indefinitely, expand the settlements, and eventually annex large parts if not all of the West Bank¹².

What is taking place right now in Israel is calling into question the entire Zionist project, what exactly it means, and whether it can survive.

Public opinion polls, such as those by Israeli TV channels N12 News and Reshet

13¹³, consistently show that the government has no support for its moves to weaken the judiciary; and some segments of society that in the past were apolitical, perhaps apathetic, or even complacent, have now woken 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

Israeli security forces vehicles stood guard by the controversial separation wall, overlooking the Palestinian Shuafat refugee camp in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem. In recent months, violence has been escalating amid rising tensions between the two sides.
AFP

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nevertheless make huge demands on the public purse¹⁴.

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 tribunal¹⁵.

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,

Israeli soldiers clash with Palestinians protesting Israeli settlers (not pictured) who set up tents on lands in Halhoul village north of Hebron in the occupied West Bank.
AFP

unchecked settler violence aided by a tailwind from those coalition members who represent the distorted ideology of Jewish supremacism. And all this at a time when the Palestinian political system itself is in complete disarray¹⁶.

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.

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