

# Netanyahu's judicial reform has brought Israelis to the streets, even IDF is protesting

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An aerial view of the protests against Netanyahu's contentious judicial overhaul, in Tel Aviv, Israel | Reuters /Oren Alon

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Lakhs of Israelis have been protesting the judicial reforms proposed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government for almost three months.

Every Saturday evening, in more than a hundred places across Israeli cities and towns, protesters assemble peacefully, some with their toddlers, to demand that the judiciary remain independent for the sake of democracy in Israel.

The last two weeks have seen 'Disruption Days' where protestors called for strikes, blocking highways and even Israel's only international airport when Netanyahu was to fly to Italy and Germany. Three per cent of the 90 lakh people in the small country are on the streets against the bill which downsizes the judiciary and will give unchecked powers to the elected government. This scale and depth of the political protests have been a spectacle in Israel, but this is not the first time such protests have broken out.

The last time such a demonstration against the government took place was in the aftermath of the Sabra and Shatila massacre of 1982. Protesters demanded that the government investigate the tacit role of then Israeli defence minister Ariel Sharon in the killing of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon by the Phalanges, a Lebanese Christian political

party. Then president of Israel, Yitzhak Navon, threatened to resign in the light of public sentiment after around 4 lakh people took to the streets. Prime Minister Menachem Begin set up an inquiry commission which found Ariel Sharon indirectly responsible for the massacre. He resigned from his role as defence minister after much resistance. He remained in the cabinet as a minister without a portfolio.

Israelis are vocal and assertive people, and political fights are frequent and not so polite. A large number of people protested the Sharon government's disengagement from Gaza in 2005. In 2011, Israelis took to the streets to protest against rising housing prices, low salaries and other social issues. Not just protests, the Israelis participate in the elections also with vigour. Even when the three-year period between 2019 to 2022 saw five challenging elections, they maintained their high participation numbers.

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## **Spirit of Israeli democracy**

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The current fight is bigger because the fundamentals of the Israeli state are being debated. The Israeli declaration of independence describes the state as Jewish and democratic, the two terms have been the centre of many debates where scholars have argued whether they're complimentary or contradictory. It worked for the Israelis, a normative framework was established where both religious and non-religious Jews could hold space in the state.

Early ruling parties were socialist and political liberals, also dominated by white Jews. Religious and conservative Zionist parties combined with many other social ideological groups of the non-white-Jews started getting power much later.

Now that the religious and Mizrahi Jews are in power, they tend to ask for historical revisions of institutions like the judiciary. The bedrock of Israeli democracy has been an independent judiciary which has maintained the spirit of the declaration of independence, in spite of the fact that the judiciary is riddled with serious class and ethnic issues along with the allegations of judicial activism. The proposed judicial reforms by the strong Right-wing coalition led by Netanyahu are reactionary. The reforms, many argue, take away judicial autonomy as well as the principle of checks and balances. In fact, before Netanyahu's personal trial in court, he too thought it was important for Israel to have judicial autonomy.

Considering the major crisis President Isaac Herzog addressed the nation thrice and suggested that the government and the opposition have a dialogue and build consensus for sensible judicial reforms. His appeal has had no takers yet. In his third address, he spoke out against the government's proposed judicial reforms calling them harmful to the nation and warned that they may even cause serious domestic unrest and even a possible civil war among the Jews of Israel.

Given the strange times for democracies, we can hardly imagine such a definite position — in favour of the political protests — from our president in India. During the long and intense farmer’s protest, which ended with stopping agricultural reform, or during the protests against Citizenship Amendment Act, there wasn’t a constructive intervention from the President of India. Whether Presidents in parliamentary democracies can change anything or not is beside the point. That they don’t remain spectators is important for democracies like India or Israel.

Isaac Herzog comes from the Likud, Netanyahu’s party, and he was elected to be the eleventh president of Israel by the government in 2021. He has sided with the protesters against most of the reforms proposed by Netanyahu.

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## **Protests reach IDF**

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The protests have leaked into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The military is a vital part of the state and society and is known as the People’s Army in Israel. Barring the ultra-Orthodox Jews, Arabs and physically or mentally incapable citizens, everybody serves in the army and many volunteer even after the conscription period. The Israeli army is divided into two parts — an active force with full-time soldiers and a reserve force that is trained for a certain minimum period every year and is available when duty calls.

Refusal to report on duty or training is consequential, yet a significant number of reservists have stopped showing up for duty and are boycotting the IDF until the current judicial reforms are withdrawn by the government.

“We will not volunteer for reserve service while a giant black flag flies over the government’s actions,” read a petition by the reservists in the Israel Defense Forces’ intelligence corps. It is one of the many open letters and petitions by reservists. In an op-ed, an IDF officer, identified only as Major R wrote that “non-democratic countries spouting hollow propaganda produce failed armies. Just look at Putin’s wretched army now in Ukraine. Israel cannot afford to have that kind of army”.

37 of the 40 pilots of the Israeli Air Forces’ 69th Squadron have refused to train as a mark of protest. The squadron operates F-15I jets that struck Syria’s nuclear reactor in 2007 and are likely to play a major role if there is any kind of military action against Iran. All ten living former air force chiefs have written a letter to the Prime Minister and Defense Minister asking for the immediate halt of the ‘constitutional coup’ as it can seriously shake the faith of the soldiers as well as high-ranking officers in their political commanders. They believe Israel’s national security is threatened now like never before with the growing inner divisions and political radicalisation that have already weakened national cohesiveness.

Refuseniks, a popular term from the past, is being used to describe people who refuse to serve their reserve duties. Their numbers are rising and this deeply worries Yoav Gallant, Minister of Defence. For weeks, he has been meeting the officers and air force pilots so that the army remains above the current political mess, it seems he has found little success and has now given hints that he may resign if the judicial reforms are not halted. Israel can not afford soldiers' protests.

Netanyahu is facing a major crisis — people who fought with him in Operation Entebbe (in Uganda in 1976) are accusing him of harming the state and society for the sake of retaining his position of power. High-tech and innovation industrialists cautioned him while he was choosing coalition partners who cared more for ideological and religious matters rather than the progress and development for all of Israelis and many of his own long-term associates in Israel and America are finding his current politics strange. Some civilian pilots and crew even refused to fly Netanyahu to Italy on his official tour. In India, such refusals will get officers fired, in Israel the airline quietly found a willing crew to fly the Prime Minister.

Theodor Herzl, one of the founding fathers of Israel, was once worried that the Jewish ultra-religious sentiments might affect the future state of Israel and may turn it into a theocracy as opposed to secular-modern notions of a democratic nation state. He cautioned the Zionists by saying that “we shall keep our priests within the confines of their temples in the same way as we shall keep our professional army within the confines of their barracks”. The fight for democracy may feel more and more important to many soldiers as they see a lack of leaders who can create a balance in Israel once again.

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(Edited by Theres Sudeep)