

Israel in crisis: Protesters believe the Netanyahu government has broken the social contract

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Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu was hospitalised for two days** with cardiac issues. The president of Israel went to see him straight from the airport after he returned from his official visit to the US. He had to reportedly convey that the Netanyahu government's ending of the "reasonableness clause" — akin to a judicial review system that acts as a check on the executive — will undermine social cohesion within Israel and Israel-US relations.

President Issac Herzog is reportedly not only concerned by what Joe Biden told him, but also by the fact that more than 50,000 people marched from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem for four days, braving the searing heat. They **marched to Jerusalem for a sit-in protest** in front of the Israeli parliament. Yet, on July 24, the government passed a law restricting judicial oversight powers. Herzog called it a "time of emergency" in Israel, and the PM did not have the luxury to rest, despite his medical issues. Thousands gathered in Jerusalem and set up tents for long days and nights of protest. Thousands of others gathered in Tel Aviv, supporters of the right-wing parties that believed their elected government should not be under judicial oversight. Israelis are divided like never before.

Israel is going through one of the most turbulent periods.

Netanyahu **suspended the controversial judicial "reforms" in March** when the country went on a national strike. During the seven-month-long protests against his government's policies, he could not bring the Bill to change the judicial selection

committee. Especially when Defence Minister Yoav Gallant came out against it. Netanyahu fired him for not toeing the government's line. Yet, he had to take back his order because the security chiefs, pilots of the Air Force and many elite military intelligence officers stood behind the defence minister. But even that didn't end the protest movement.

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Even when the judicial reforms were suspended, protesters suspected the current government wouldn't relent and kept the streets full of people — out every Saturday evening. On his part, the PM needed to assure his hardline base that he would not scrap the idea of judicial reforms. He sought to pass just one item of the reform agenda: Not to let the judiciary override the laws enacted by an elected government. Without a constitution, critics fear this would grant unchecked powers to current and future governments. They could make laws that discriminate against many — secular-liberal Israelis, women, LGBTQ people, et al — who fear that they will have to adhere strictly to Jewish religious norms if there is no independent judiciary to balance the various schools of Judaism in Israel.

About 10,000 reservists of the Israeli Defence Force have come out against the government. They have suspended their volunteer reserve duty. Around 1,000 elite pilots, intelligent officers, and cyber security personnel who are part of the reserve force have also declared the end of their services. They say they had a contract with a democratic polity based on consensus, which is no longer the principle that guides the current government. “We pledged to serve the kingdom and not the king,” many said.

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The arbitrary exercise of power by the executive is not supported by the protesting soldiers who believe their allegiance is to the country, not a particular government. Yoav Gallant, in a redux of the March crisis, chose to stand with the dissenting soldiers rather than punish any of them. The country's leading think-tank, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), has asked for a halt to the legislative proceedings in light of growing protests from soldiers, which it terms the most severe crisis Israel has ever faced. Israel's Business Forum, consisting of 150 top business leaders, warned of a “national economic shutdown”, which froze everyday life in Israel on Monday.

The civil movement has been well-sustained and it successfully prevented the major judicial overhaul in March. Last week, it could not stop the passing of one bill though, and that worries many about the future of the country. In the context of Asia — Israel is a West Asian country — there hasn't been such a successful people's movement for decades. The Arab Spring withered away. In Israel, it is the soldiers of the People's Army, as the Israel Defence Force is called, who hold the real leverage going ahead. They can, perhaps, stop the government from changing the fundamentals of the Israeli polity because no ideological camp or government can do well without a strong security apparatus, given Israel's multiple open wars with its neighbours.

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