

# Israel MPs approve judicial reform clause as protests flare



Israel's security forces use a water cannon to disperse a sit-in blocking the entrance of the parliament (Knesset) in Al-Quds on July 24, 2023, amid a months-long wave of protests against the planned judicial overhaul. **RONALDO SCHEMIDT/AFP**

Israel's hard-right cabinet on Monday pushed through parliament a key clause of its controversial judicial reform package despite months of mass protests and concerns voiced by foreign allies. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition allies approved

the bill in a Knesset vote boycotted by opposition lawmakers, some of whom shouted "shame, shame", according to AFP. Critics charge the judicial revamp will undermine Israel's liberal democracy by removing checks and balances on the executive, while the cabinet argues

it needs to curb judicial overreach. The bill, passed with 64 votes in the 120-seat chamber, aims to limit the powers of the Supreme Court in striking down cabinet decisions which the judges deem "unreasonable". The reform package has triggered one of the big-

gest protest movements in Israel's history since it was unveiled by the cabinet in January. The bill was passed hours after Netanyahu, 73, returned to the Knesset - only a day after undergoing surgery to have a pacemaker fitted - as police outside the legislature

used water cannon and mounted officers were deployed against a crowd of demonstrators. Netanyahu's cabinet, which includes far-right and ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties, argues that the proposed changes are needed to ensure a better balance of power.

## Social polarization: Israel's unyielding reality



By Hojjatollah Joudaki  
Former Iranian diplomat in Egypt

### OPINION EXCLUSIVE

Yesterday, the Israeli parliament, known as Knesset, passed a pivotal clause in a judicial reform bill amid widespread and unprecedented protests against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's proposed changes to the judicial system. This motion strips the Israeli judicial system of its authority

to overturn government and ministerial decisions. Now, the pressing question arises: Will the approval of this key aspect of the judicial reform bill put an end to the challenges faced by Netanyahu's cabinet and the Israeli political system, leading protesters to return home? It is doubtful that the reform bill alone will quell the challenges dogging Netanyahu and Israel. Despite Netanyahu's right-wing coalition legally securing a majority in the parliament through elections, they face a fundamental societal challenge

from opponents and protesters. The crux of Israel's current political predicament lies in extreme polarization within society. On one side, there are liberals and leftists, less bound by rigid religious beliefs, while on the other, there are orthodox religious groups with staunchly conservative leanings. The divide between these two factions has deepened considerably, with the religious population holding sway in numbers due to higher birth rates within their communities. This demographic composition significantly contributed

to the right-wing coalition's victory in the latest elections. Consequently, while Netanyahu may hold the upper hand in law and parliament, a significant portion of Israeli society vehemently opposes both his and his government's policies and plans. The extreme right-wing, aligned with Netanyahu, is seeking to exploit the new laws pertaining to the judicial system to their advantage. For instance, they could manipulate the composition of the Supreme Court to further their extremist agendas whenever necessary.

Yesterday's resolution effectively grants the cabinet and right-wing factions carte blanche to pursue their radical plans, sparking further protest reactions. Notably, even Israel's European and American supporters have become vocal critics of Netanyahu's cabinet policies. As a result, the political opposition to Netanyahu's government is exploring fresh avenues to challenge and disrupt its policies. While the scale of street protests may diminish, the ramifications of Israel's deep social and political divisions will continue to afflict the government and political system. Over the past few months, numerous former Israeli

political, security, and military officials have sounded alarms, warning that the current cabinet's policies jeopardize Israel's security. Their insights stem from a thorough understanding of the prevailing state of Israeli society due to their experiences. The parliament's new ratification only exacerbates the existing social disparities. In any society, the wider the gaps, the more prone it becomes to crises. In Israel, "divergence" has replaced "convergence" as the stark reality of society. Consequently, the challenges faced by the cabinet and the Israeli political system show no signs of abating.

## Fugitive Catalan leader holds key to Spanish electoral impasse

A Catalan independence leader on the run from Spanish justice could hold the key to unlocking a political impasse after Sunday's election ended in a hung parliament. Former Catalan regional government head Carles Puigdemont, who lives in self-imposed exile in Belgium since leading a failed push to split Catalonia from Spain in 2017, unexpectedly finds himself a potential kingmaker after no bloc on the left or right won enough seats to form a majority, Reuters reported. One path out of the labyrinth would be for Socialist

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez to secure a vote in favour, or at least an abstention, in a parliamentary vote on forming a government from Puigdemont's Junts party in exchange for further concessions on independence. The centre-right People's Party (PP) and the far-right Vox won the most seats in parliament with a combined 169 - short of the 176 seats needed for a majority and confounding poll predictions. The ruling Socialists (PSOE) and far-left Sumar won 153 but have more possibilities for negotiating support from small Basque

and Catalan separatist parties, as they did following 2019's election. Sanchez could win over left-wing separatist party Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC). But he will likely also need the backing of the more hardline Junts, which has not supported Sanchez in the past four years. Junts Secretary General Jordi Turull said on Monday he would use the "window of opportunity" created by the election impasse to achieve Catalan independence. "The state knows that if it wants to negotiate with us, there are two issues that

are fundamental and generate consensus in Catalonia which are an amnesty and self-determination," he said in an interview with local radio station RAC 1. Turull was among the nine Catalan jailed separatist leaders pardoned by Sanchez in 2021 for their role in the 2017 independence bid. However, many more are still facing trial, chief amongst them Puigdemont. Puigdemont, who still wields considerable influence within Junts, said in mid-July the party would not support Sanchez because he was unreliable. Early on Monday he tweet-

ed that Junts is a party that keeps its word. Puigdemont was stripped of the immunity he had as a member of the European Parliament earlier this month, paving the way for his extradition, as Spanish authorities have requested for the past six years. The Catalans are likely to play hardball in any negotiations after the election laid bare that a rapprochement with Madrid has not worked in their favour, said Joan Esculies, a writer and analyst on Catalan politics.



### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### China warns Japan on NATO eastward expansion

**REUTERS** - The Chinese Embassy in Japan said in a statement on Monday that NATO's plan to expand into the Asia-Pacific violates UN rules. The embassy hoped Japan, in its interaction with NATO, would refrain from actions that undermine trust among countries in the region. The statement came after the Japanese ambassador to the United States said in May that the US-led military pact was planning a Tokyo liaison office, the first in Asia, to facilitate consultations in the region.

#### Russia vows retaliation after Ukraine drone strike



**REUTERS** - Russia spoke of taking harsh retaliatory measures against Ukraine after two drones damaged buildings in Moscow early on Monday, including one close to the Defense Ministry's headquarters, in what it called a brazen act of terror. Nobody was hurt in the attack, of which a senior Ukrainian official said there would be more, but one drone struck close to the Moscow building where the Russian military holds briefings on its special military operation in Ukraine.

#### 15 dead in Indonesia boat incident



**AFP** - At least 15 people were killed on Monday after a wooden boat sank off the coast of Indonesia's Sulawesi Island, search and rescue officials said, adding that all missing passengers had been accounted for. The boat sank with 48 people onboard just after midnight (1700 GMT on Sunday), the local office of Indonesia's search and rescue agency said in a statement. Six people were rescued and taken to hospital for treatment, it added, and the cause of the sinking was being investigated.