



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on March 29, 2023

Israelis Protest Against Netanyahu's Proposed Judicial Reforms and Sacking of Defense Minister

SINGAPORE — On March 27, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition plummeted into mayhem following widespread overnight protests over the sacking of his defense minister. These protests encouraged Netanyahu's coalition to stop its controversial plans to reform the judiciary.

Netanyahu had hitherto declared that he had dismissed Defense Minister Yoav Gallant for opposing the plans. Gallant had issued a televised appeal on March 26 for the government to stop its judicial reforms, cautioning that the deep divisions these reforms had provoked were impacting the military and undermining national security.



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A former navy admiral, Gallant had cautioned on March 25 that the overhaul plans risked "a clear, immediate and tangible threat to the security of the state." After all, protests have entailed increasing numbers of military reservists, thus impacting regular forces and undermining national security. "At this time, for the sake of our country, I am willing to take any risk and pay any price," Gallant said in a televised address.

Some of Netanyahu's hardline coalition partners had called for Gallant to be sacked, but other Likud lawmakers supported the call for a halt to the reforms.

Netanyahu's office did not name Gallant's replacement or provide more details following the latter's dismissal. "Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has decided this evening to dismiss Defence Minister Yoav Gallant," it declared.

Subsequently, Gallant, 64, wrote on Twitter: "The state of Israel's security has always been and will always be my life's mission."

With the army reinforcing units in the occupied West Bank after a year of unyielding violence that has killed over 250 Palestinian gunmen and civilians and more than 40 Israelis, Gallant's removal led to allegations that Netanyahu's government was pursuing its own interests at the expense of the nation's.

As news of Gallant's sacking spread, tens of thousands of protesters with blue-and-white Israeli flags took to the streets late at night across the country. In Jerusalem, thousands of Israelis gathered in front of the building of the Knesset, Israel's parliament. Crowds also convened outside Netanyahu's home in Jerusalem, violating a security cordon at one point.

Demonstrators blocked roads and intersections at various locations, while protests persisted throughout the night. Moreover, occasional riots broke out, to which police responded with water cannons and charges while on horseback.



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The chaos came at a major moment in the passage of the legislation, with a bill giving the executive more control over the nomination of judges slated to be tabled for ratification this week in the Knesset, where Netanyahu and his allies dominate 64 out of 120 seats.

While the government has claimed that an overhaul is necessary to bring activist judges in check and balance the elected government and the judiciary, critics view it as a threat to legal checks and balances.

During hostile exchanges in the Knesset early on Monday, opposition Members of Parliament attacked Simcha Rothman, the committee chairman who has directed the bill, with cries of “Shame! Shame!” and claims linking the legislation to militant Islamist groups that plan to undermine Israel.

“This is a hostile takeover of the State of Israel. No need for Hamas, no need for Hezbollah,” one lawmaker was heard slamming Rothman as the Constitution committee tried to push ahead with a key part of the bill. “State security cannot be a card in the political game. Netanyahu crossed a red line tonight,” opposition leaders Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz declared in a joint statement.

These two leaders also urged members of Netanyahu’s Likud party not to contribute to “the crushing of national security.”

However, “The law is balanced and good for Israel,” Rothman asserted in turn.

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who leads one of the steadfast pro-settler parties in the coalition, urged the overhaul to proceed. “We must not stop the judiciary reform and must not surrender to anarchy,” he tweeted.

Amid an increasing security emergency in the occupied West Bank, Gallant’s removal sent Netanyahu’s national-religious coalition into turmoil just three months after taking power.

The shekel, which has seen big fluctuations over recent weeks as the political commotion has played out, dropped 0.7 percent in early trading before stabilizing a little amid speculations that the legislation would be stopped. By late morning, shares in Tel Aviv were up around 2 percent and the shekel had increased around 0.8 percent.

As opposition mounted, Arnon Bar-David, the head of the Histadrut labor union, the umbrella group for hundreds of thousands of public-sector workers, lobbied for a general strike if the proposals were not stopped.

“Bring back the country’s sanity. If you don’t announce in a news conference today that you changed your mind, we will go on strike,” Bar-David threatened, saying that he was “astonished” by Gallant’s removal.

Meanwhile, flights from Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion airport were suspended, while Israel’s main seaports, hospitals, and medical services were expected to strike. McDonald’s outlets remained shut as the protests spread across the economy.

Netanyahu was poised to make a speech on national television on Monday morning highlighting the steps he claimed were necessary to restore balance to the system of government. However, in the wake of reports that his nationalist-religious coalition was vulnerable to collapse, he postponed the speech while he met with heads of the parties.

Previously, a source in Netanyahu’s Likud party and another source well acquainted with the legislation said Netanyahu would suspend the overhaul that has provoked some of Israel’s largest protests.



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President Isaac Herzog, whose presidential function is mainly ceremonial, pointed out the divisions ignited by the contentious judicial proposals. “For the sake of the unity of the people of Israel, for the sake of responsibility, I call on you to stop the legislative process immediately,” he posted on Twitter.

Additionally, Israel’s consul-general in New York announced his resignation over the dismissal. The top diplomat believed it was his duty “to ensure that Israel remains a beacon of democracy and freedom in the world,” and in light of this, claimed that he could no longer continue representing the current government.

Likewise, Israel’s research universities declared that they would stop holding classes, demanding an immediate stop to Netanyahu’s overhaul plans.

Netanyahu’s legislative project has also sparked concerns among Israel’s allies. The United States said it was deeply concerned by Sunday’s events and saw a key need for compromise, calling for democratic values to be protected. “We continue to strongly urge Israeli leaders to find a compromise as soon as possible. We believe that is the best path forward for Israel and all of its citizens,” White House National Security Council spokesman Adrienne Watson said in a statement.

“As the President recently discussed with Prime Minister Netanyahu, democratic values have always been, and must remain, a hallmark of the U.S.-Israel relationship,” she continued. “Democratic societies are strengthened by checks and balances, and fundamental changes to a democratic system should be pursued with the broadest possible base of popular support.”

In response, Netanyahu postponed his plans for judicial overhaul till next month. “From a will to prevent the rift in the nation, I have decided to delay the second and third reading in order to reach a broad consensus,” he declared on television, calling the move “a chance to avoid a civil war.”

The legislation, which has passed a first reading, will not proceed before the next Knesset session, which begins after the Passover holiday and lasts until the end of July.

Nonetheless, Netanyahu indicated to the Knesset that he was not going to accept military insubordination, which he portrayed as a disaster for the country, as it would set a precedent for soldiers on the other political side. Following his address, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) published an order reminding soldiers to remain united.

Netanyahu also addressed his own political supporters and the members of his governing coalition, telling them that they had made their voices heard, and that most people now agreed on the need for judicial reform.

Many of Netanyahu’s supporters welcomed his remarks, as he appeared to seize the moral high ground from the left-wing protesters who had brought the country to a halt, even barring international flights from leaving.

However, based on reports by Israeli media and Reuters, it remains unclear precisely how Netanyahu’s postponement of the bill would satisfy either side or diffuse a crisis that the army chief said made “this hour different to any before.”

Shikma Bressler, one of the main protest leaders against the legislative reforms, claimed Netanyahu was trying to undermine the demonstrations. “Now is not the time to reduce the pressure, but to increase it,” Bressler said.

Some members of Netanyahu’s government had reportedly threatened to resign over any compromises, whether as amendments or postponements. Some coalition partners unwillingly chose postponement,



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while others like the ethno-nationalist Jewish Power (Otzma Yehudit) party, a major coalition partner headed by Ben-Gvir, did not want the law postponed at first.



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