

Israeli government fails to extend controversial Citizenship Law

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The vote was the first major political test for new Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett
[Menahem Kahana/ AFP]

Tel Aviv, July 6 (RHC)-- Israel's new government suffered its first big defeat in parliament, failing to renew a controversial law that prevents Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip who marry Palestinian citizens of Israel from gaining citizenship and residency rights themselves.

It was the first major political test for Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who for nearly a month now has been heading a narrow and diverse coalition that includes left-wing, centrist and Palestinian parties, along with his own ultranationalist party.

The eight-party coalition in parliament fell short of a majority in the early hours of Tuesday after a marathon all-night session to extend the so-called Citizenship and Entry Into Israel Law, underscoring the government's fragility.

Sami Abou Shahadeh, a member of the Palestinian Joint List party in the Knesset, said the failure of the law's extension is "a victory for thousands of [Palestinian] families". The coalition is united by little but their shared enmity to opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu, whom they unseated from the premiership last month after a record 12 straight years in power.

Of the 120 legislators, 59 voted in favor and 59 voted against. Two abstained. A vote of no confidence in the new government also failed.

The law prevents Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip who marry Palestinian citizens of Israel from automatically gaining Israeli residency and citizenship, causing endless complications for Palestinians living across Israel and the territories it has occupied since 1967.

The ban was first enacted during the second Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, and justified by supporters on security grounds, but critics derided it as a discriminatory measure amounting to apartheid that targets Israel's Palestinian minority.

On Monday, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid stated the law was more about demographic engineering, adding that it "is of security importance." "[There's] no need to hide from the purpose of the [citizenship] law," he posted on Twitter. "It's one of the tools meant to secure a Jewish majority in Israel. Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, and our goal is that it will have a Jewish majority."

In a protest against the measure outside parliament on Monday, some recounted the hardships of seeking permits to join their spouses, or the risks of entering Israeli territory without permission. Ali Meteb told AFP news agency that his wife not having Israeli residency rights had confined his family to a "continuous prison."

"I am asking for rights that the state owes us ... for my wife to have Israeli ID, residency rights and freedom of movement," he said.

Jessica Montell, the head of Hamoked, an Israeli human rights group that provides legal services to Palestinians, said "tens of thousands of families are harmed by this law." According to an amendment to the law from 2005, women over 25 and men over 35 are allowed to apply for temporary residence permits.

The law was enacted for one year and since 2003 has been extended on an annual basis, including by Netanyahu, who now leads the opposition. Netanyahu, who calls Bennett's government a threat to Israel's security, refused to give him a lifeline and voted against it.

Bennett last month reached a power-sharing deal with centrist Yair Lapid to unseat Netanyahu. Together they put together a coalition of parties with 62 of 120 seats in parliament. Under the deal, Lapid will take over as prime minister after two years.

Israeli media reported that the bill was amended as a compromise to the coalition parties that opposed the law. The amended law would have allowed for a six-month extension, in addition to granting residency rights to 1,600 Palestinians living in Israel.

A few coalition party members did not vote in favour of extending the law, including a member of Bennett's own party.

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