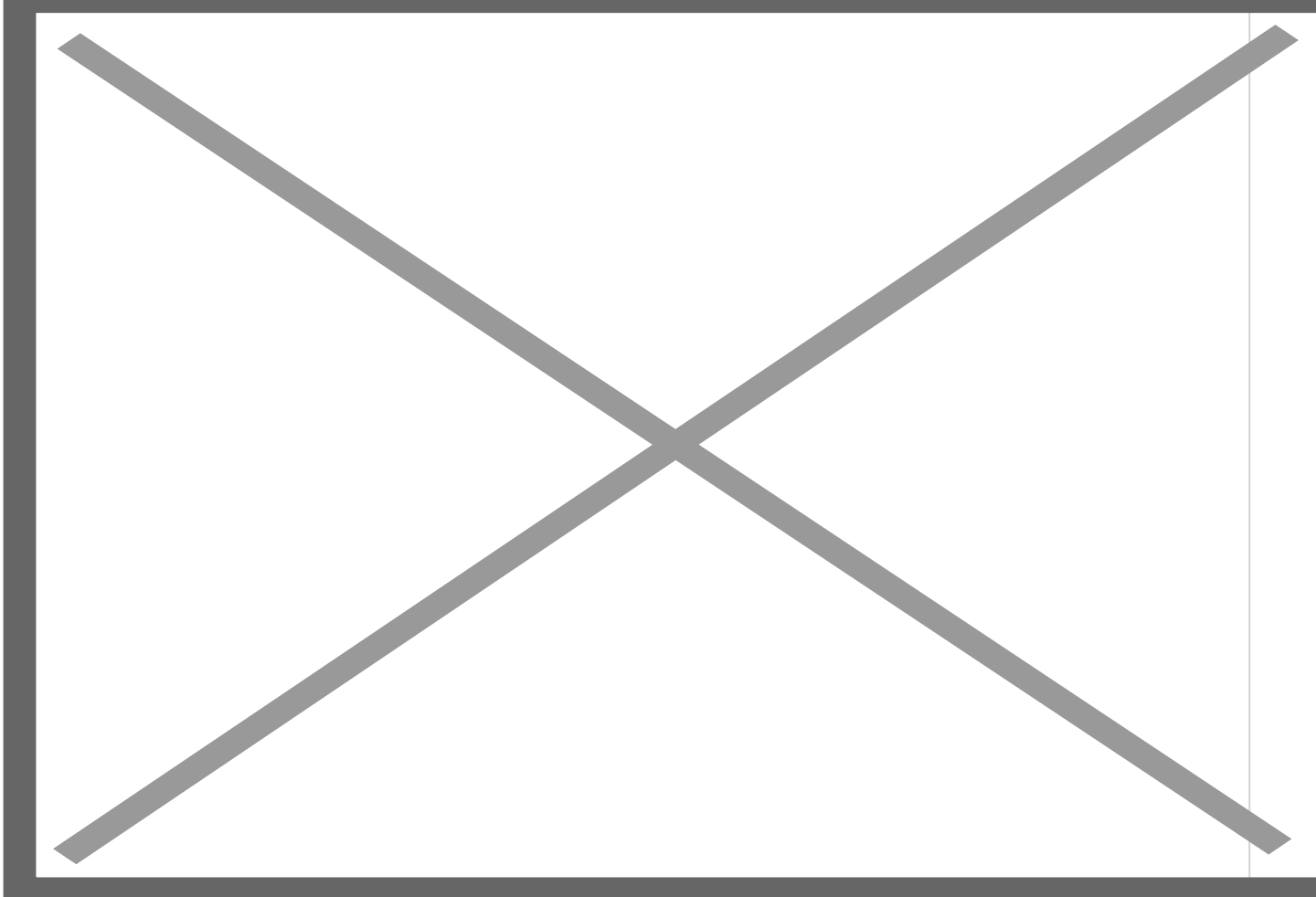


Israelis stage protests near parliament against judicial reforms

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Israelis hold flags and posters as they demonstrate against the government's plan to overhaul judicial powers [Ammar Awad/Reuters]

Tel Aviv, February 13 (RHC)-- Thousands of people held protests in front of the Israeli parliament as lawmakers were engaged in a heated debate on a bill that would give politicians greater power over appointing judges.

The plans, which would give right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu greater control of appointments to the Supreme Court bench, have triggered widespread protests. Many protesters carried the blue and white Israeli flag and posters decrying what they saw as an attack on the country's democratic institutions. "Shame! Shame!" they chanted. Some placards read "Save Israel Democracy" and "The whole world is watching." Other demonstrations were held outside schools around the country.

The Knesset Constitution Committee voted to send the first chapter of the plan to the plenum for a first reading, after a rowdy start to the meeting in which at least three opposition lawmakers were thrown out forcibly, to shouts of "Shame, shame."

Netanyahu, currently on trial on corruption charges which he denies, says the changes are needed to curb activist judges who have overreached their powers to interfere in the political sphere. Critics say they risk destroying Israel's system of democratic checks and balances by weakening the courts, handing unbridled power to the executive and endangering civil liberties and human rights.

Morning trains from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on Monday were packed with people, many carrying Israeli flags and protest signs, heading to the planned demonstrations outside Knesset, the Israeli parliament, and other sites across the country.

Many businesses, including tech startups and law firms, gave permission to employees to join the nationwide strikes, local media reported.

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