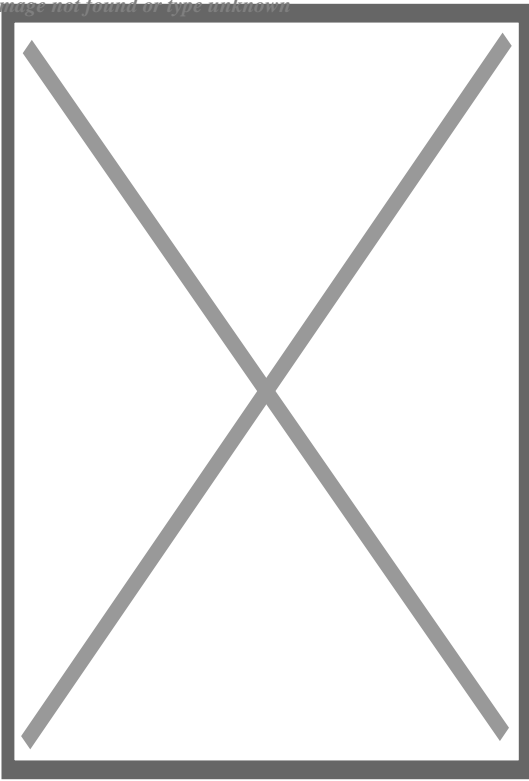


Thousands stage fresh rallies to condemn Israeli cabinet's planned judicial reform

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Tel Aviv, March 17 (RHC)-- Protesters have taken to the streets of Israeli cities again to reject a plan by the far-right and coalition cabinet led by prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to reform the regime's court system and curb the Supreme Court's powers.

Demonstrators blocked the exit off the Ayalon Highway in Tel Aviv during judicial reform demonstrations on Thursday morning, according to Israeli media. Walla! news site reported that the highway was blocked southbound. Hundreds of protesters, many waving Israeli flags, jumped over barricades to get on the highway. They were, however, pulled away by police, some of them mounted on horses.

Tel Aviv University students also placed barbed wire fences at the entrance to the university, according to a report by the student protest organizers. "We are putting up a barricade to protect freedom of speech

and freedom of the press,” the organizers told the media, “against the unbridled power that the administration intends to acquire for itself in this wave of legislation.”

Elsewhere in the ultra-orthodox city of Bnei Brak, protesters flocked the streets and They tried to erect a mock military recruit station, saying now it is the time for ultra-orthodox Jews to go to the army and share their burden.

At the Haifa Port, a number of protesters on boats, including former navy men, blocked entry for commercial ships. “The Navy will not sail into a dictatorship,” read signs hung on the Israel Navy reservists' boats.

Protest organizers say there will be several centers of protest, in the northern, southern and central parts of the Israeli-occupied territories. There will also be demonstrations in front of various embassies.

The controversial “legal reforms” serve as the centerpiece of the policies of the Netanyahu-led cabinet, which he cobbled together late last year by wooing ultra-Orthodox and hard-right parties. They seek to enfeeble the regime’s Supreme Court by robbing it of the power to strike down either the cabinet or the legislature’s decisions.

Another element of the reforms would give the 120-member parliament the power to overrule the court’s decisions with a simple majority of 61 votes. The reforms would also empower the Knesset to amend the so-called Basic Laws – the regime’s quasi-constitution – in any way it sees fit.

Observers say the reforms can potentially enable the Knesset to annul a set of corruption charges that Netanyahu is being tried on. The Israeli prime minister is being sued for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust.

The Knesset also advanced a bill that would make it harder to remove Netanyahu over the corruption charges that still hang over him. The bill would allow the Israeli parliament to declare a prime minister unfit to rule only for physical or mental reasons and would replace current law that opens the door for a leader to be removed under other circumstances.

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