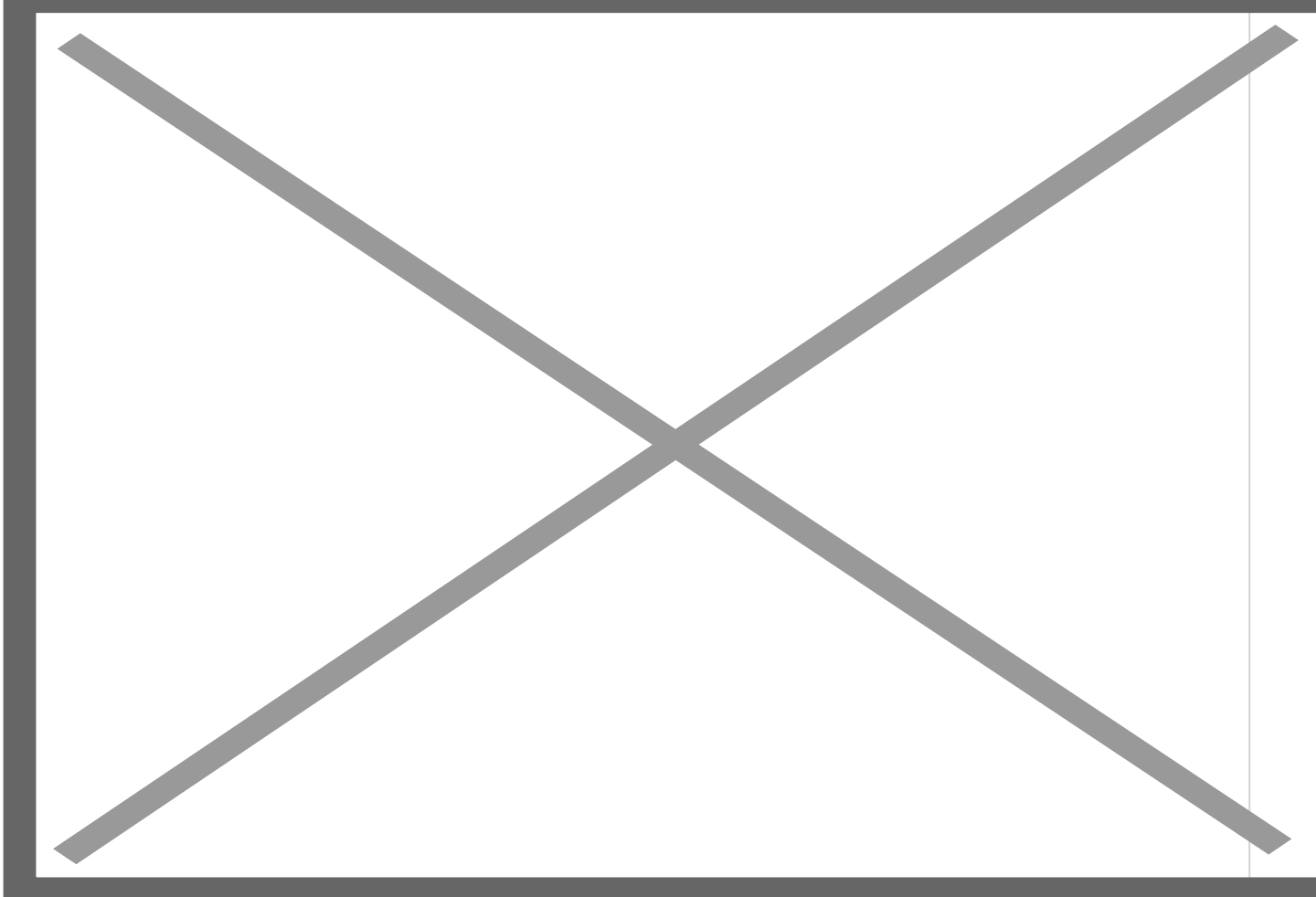


Israelis rally for fifth week against Netanyahu's judicial plans

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Israelis hold flags as they protest against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new right-wing coalition and its proposed judicial reforms to reduce powers of the Supreme Court in Tel Aviv, Israel, February 4, 2023 [Ronen Zvulun/ Reuters]

Tel Aviv, February 5 (RHC)--Tens of thousands of Israelis have gathered for a fifth week of protests against controversial judicial changes proposed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government. Protesters in the central city of Tel Aviv braved heavy rain for Saturday's protest, carrying blue and white Israeli flags and chanting slogans against Netanyahu's justice minister.

"I'm here tonight protesting against the transition of Israel from a democracy to an autocracy," Dov Levenglick, a 48-year-old software engineer, told the Reuters news agency in Tel Aviv. "It's a disgrace, it shall not stand."

The proposed changes, which the government says are needed to curb overreach by judges, have drawn fierce opposition from groups including lawyers and raised concerns among business leaders, widening already deep political divisions in Israeli society.

Critics say Israeli democracy would be undermined if the government succeeds in pushing through the plans, which would tighten political control over judicial appointments and limit the Supreme Court's powers to overturn government decisions or Knesset laws.

"They want to tear up the judiciary system of Israel, they want to tear up Israeli democracy, and we are here every week in every weather ... to fight against it and to fight for Israeli democracy," Hadar Segal, 35, told Reuters in Tel Aviv.

Local media reported protests in some 20 cities across the country. Among the crowd in Haifa was former Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, who said in a video posted to social media: "We will save our country because we are unwilling to live in an undemocratic country."

Netanyahu, on trial for corruption, has dismissed the protests as a refusal by leftist opponents to accept the results of last November's election, which produced one of the most right-wing governments in Israel's history.

Last month, Netanyahu was forced to remove a top minister, Aryeh Deri, who leads the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, due to a recent tax evasion conviction. In addition to the judicial changes, his government has announced its intention to expand illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, as well as social reforms that have worried the LGBTQ community.

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