

Netanyahu pushes back Israel judicial changes deadline

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People hold Israeli flags during a demonstration as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's nationalist coalition government presses on with its contentious judicial overhaul, in Tel Aviv, Israel [File: Nir Elias/Reuters]

Tel Aviv, March 21 (RHC)-- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced a softening of his hard-right government's judicial changes plan, an apparent concession to more than two months of unprecedented nationwide protests and misgivings voiced by Western allies.

Wielding a parliamentary majority, Netanyahu had looked set to ratify the package of reforms by the Knesset's April 2 recess. However, most of its elements will now be shelved until the parliament reconvenes on April 30, Netanyahu and religious-nationalist coalition allies said on Monday.

The parts of the legislation that are still scheduled for ratification in the next two weeks would shake up Israel's method of selecting judges – an issue at the heart of the reform controversy, with critics accusing Netanyahu of trying to curb the independence of the courts. He insists his goal is balance among branches of government.

The uproar over the legal changes has plunged Israel into one of its worst domestic crises. Beyond the protests, which have drawn tens of thousands of Israelis to the streets and have recently become violent, opposition has surged from across society, with business leaders and legal officials speaking out against what they say will be the ruinous effects of the plan.

The legislation would give more weight to the government in the committee that selects judges and would deny the Supreme Court the right to strike down any amendments to so-called Basic Laws, Israel's quasi-constitution.

Monday's coalition statement used more circumspect language than in the original bill introduced on January 4, but said it would continue to check the power of judges on the selection panel to use what it deemed an "automatic veto" over nominations to the bench.

The statement further noted amendments made to the bill in a Knesset review session on Sunday, whereby the selection panel would be expanded from 9 to 11 members as originally planned but with a makeup that grants the government less potential clout.

Previously, the bill envisaged the panel including three cabinet ministers, two coalition parliamentarians and two public figures chosen by the government – spelling a maximum 7-4 vote majority. In its amended form, the bill envisages the panel being made up of three cabinet ministers, three coalition parliamentarians, three judges and two opposition parliamentarians. That could spell a slimmer, more precarious 6-5 majority for the government.

The amended bill further stipulates that no more than two Supreme Court justices can be appointed by regular panel voting in a given Knesset session. Any appointments beyond that would have to be approved by a majority vote including at least one judge and one opposition lawmaker among selection panel members. "We are extending a hand to anyone who genuinely cares about national unity and the desire to reach an agreed accord," the coalition statement said.

The judicial overhaul is a cornerstone of Netanyahu's administration, an alliance with ultra-Orthodox Jewish and extreme-right parties which took office in late December.

Some critics have said Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption, is driven by personal grievances and that he could find an escape route from the charges if these changes are put through.

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