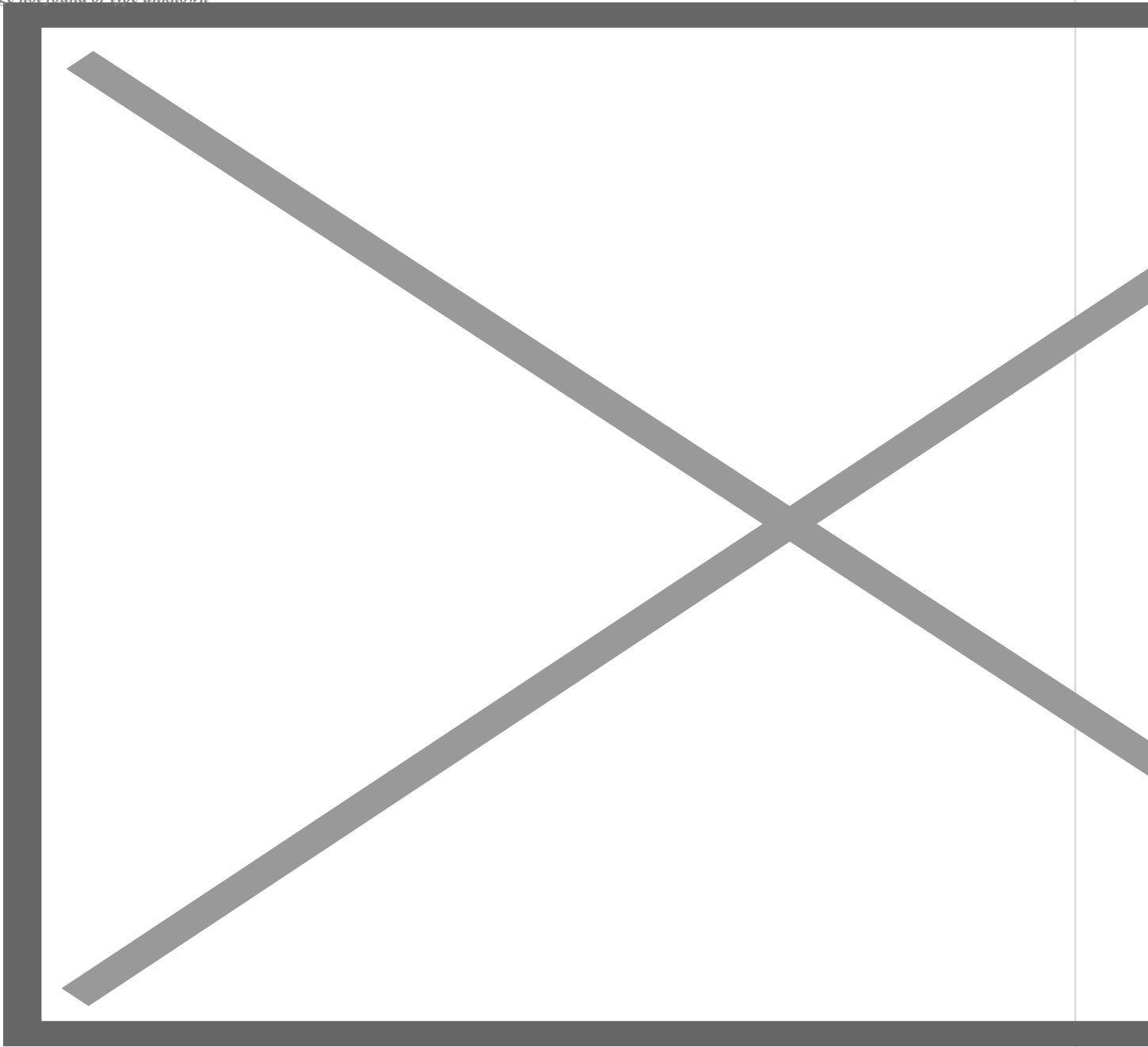


Protests continue in Israel against proposed judicial changes

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Demonstrators rally with US and Israeli flags outside the US diplomatic offices in Tel Aviv. [Menahem Kahana/AFP]?

Tel Aviv, July 12 (RHC)-- Thousands of Israeli protesters took to the streets on Tuesday, blocking major highways and thronging the country's main international airport, in countrywide demonstrations against the government's contentious plan to change the country's judicial system.

The demonstrations came the morning after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's parliamentary coalition's proposed bill to limit the Supreme Court's oversight powers gained initial approval. Police used a water cannon to clear protesters in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and arrested several protesters who obstructed a highway near the central city of Modiin.

Activists demonstrated nationwide throughout the day, including at a mass afternoon protest at Ben Gurion International Airport. An estimated 10,000 people gathered outside the main terminal, blowing horns and waving Israeli flags. Police held the crowd back.

Police reported 71 arrests nationwide for alleged public disorder. Protesters scuffled with police in various locations, with at least one protester hurt by a police horse, but no major violence was reported.

Netanyahu's ultranationalist and ultra-Orthodox allies have proposed a series of bills that provoked months of sustained protests by opponents who say the country is being pushed towards authoritarian rule.

Weekly mass protests have taken place since the far-right government presented its plan in January, days after taking office. The protests led Netanyahu to suspend the proposal in March, but he decided to revive it last month after compromise talks with the opposition collapsed.

The parliamentary vote on Tuesday night renewed the protests' momentum. The bill still needs to pass two more votes, expected by the end of the month, before it becomes law.

Late on Tuesday, tens of thousands gathered in central Tel Aviv – the site of weekly protests against the proposal for more than six months – and made their way to the city's main highway, which they briefly blocked.

Earlier, a crowd gathered outside United States diplomatic offices in Tel Aviv, calling on the White House to put pressure on Netanyahu to halt the bill. A smaller protest also took place outside Netanyahu's home in central Jerusalem.

Critics of the proposed bill say it will upset the country's fragile system of checks and balances and concentrate power in the hands of Netanyahu and his allies. They also say Netanyahu has a conflict of interest because he is on trial for charges of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes.

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