

ANALYSIS

# Pro-overhaul protest showed the right's strengths – and the government's weakness

Likud voters want gov't to focus on declining economy, Haredi parties want draft exemption law, religious Zionist voters want continued judicial reform. Can PM satisfy them all?

Haviv Rettig Gur April 29, 2023



Right-wing Israelis attend a rally in support of plans by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government to overhaul the judicial system, outside the Knesset, Israel's parliament in Jerusalem, Thursday, April 27, 2023. (AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg)

Thursday's protest in support of the government's judicial overhaul was big enough.

Whether it was around 100,000, as opponents claimed, or 600,000, as organizers said, is less significant. (Most estimates put the figure at some 200,000.) It was big enough.

Enough to send a message that there was a real and mobilized base of support for the government's prioritizing of its efforts to remake the judiciary.

Enough to grant Justice Minister Yariv Levin a respectable backdrop for a speech that blamed the judiciary for many of the country's ills and demanded that the battle over the judiciary remain at the top of the government's agenda.

Enough to make the point to the other side that the right also knows how to bring out its supporters.

It was a show of strength.

But it was also a show of weakness, a signal of Netanyahu's great challenge going forward.



Justice Minister Yariv Levin attends a rally in support of the government's planned judicial overhaul outside the Knesset in Jerusalem, April 27, 2023. (Arie Leib Abrams/Flash90)

## **The economy, stupid**

At first glance, the Netanyahu government seems very stable — that special sort of stability enjoyed by coalition governments with low polling numbers, propped up by the simple calculus that no member of the coalition wants to face the voters at their angriest.

One Thursday poll for the Maariv news site found Netanyahu's coalition down 14 seats from its current 64, with Likud itself responsible for nine of those lost seats, dropping from 32 to 23.

No poll is really trustworthy in this political moment. The usual caveats are in force: Different methodologies, pollsters' prejudices and so on. But it's also not clear what voters actually mean when they tell a pollster they've changed their minds. If the Maariv poll is to be believed, nearly a third of Likud's voters in the last election appear to have shifted their votes to Benny Gantz's National Unity, which swelled to six seats more than Likud itself. Even if the numbers are right and the polling methods accurate, do those answers signify a real and resilient shift or a momentary explosion of frustration that won't survive till Election Day?

These are important questions, but they don't help Netanyahu. His problem is not one poll but all of them, including those by right-wing pollsters identified with Likud. For example, a mid-April [poll](#) by one-time Netanyahu confidant Shlomo Filber gave the coalition seven more seats than Maariv, or 57. But that's still seven below the current Knesset. And Filber found Itamar Ben Gvir's Otzma Yehudit faction hovering perilously close to the 3.25 percent vote threshold for falling out of the Knesset altogether. In other words, the decline is real.

And numerous polls offer insight into its reasons. Half the electorate is angry at the government over its judicial shakeup plans. But what's driving anywhere from seven to 14 Knesset seats' worth of voters away from Likud and other coalition parties? What's driving right-wing voters to join the center-left in polls showing the government's unfavorability rating reaching into the high sixties?



An aerial photo of the pro-judicial overhaul rally in Jerusalem on April 27, 2023. (Flash90)

“What do you think should be the priority of the government?” a Channel 12 poll asked last week. It asked respondents to choose between just two options: The looming “economic crisis” — rising food and gas prices, inflation, etc. — and the “judicial reform.”

Nearly three-quarters, 74%, said the economy and just 19% wanted the judicial reform — a whopping 55-point gap.

And when Likud voters were pulled from the larger sample, the gap was almost as huge: 69% economy, 27% judicial reform — a 42-point gap.

None of this is new. In late October, in the run-up to Election Day, a Channel 12 poll gave voters a list of issues and asked them to pick the one that should be “the main issue the parties should take care of the day after the next government is formed.”

Reforming the judiciary came fourth, with just 7% placing it at the top. First place was “personal security” (37%), followed by “housing prices” (28%) and “the education system” (8%).

This doesn’t mean judicial reform isn’t important to right-wing voters, only that it’s deemed less urgent than other issues.



National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir at a rally in support of the government's planned judicial overhaul outside the Knesset in Jerusalem on April 27, 2023. (Arie Leib Abrams/Flash90)

It matters, then, that the government has very publicly neglected nearly every other issue in the four months since the coalition was formed. Entire ministries and vital agencies — welfare, labor, the National Insurance Institute — are still without chief executives. Dozens of important decisions are waiting in the Justice Ministry for minister Yariv Levin's signature, unable to move forward because his attention is elsewhere.

With less than a month to the deadline for passing a state budget, the budget bill has barely been dealt with in the Knesset. It's now advancing with major and long-promised reforms, including a streamlining of import regulations that Netanyahu promised in the election campaign would dramatically lower the cost of living, which have been removed. The government and the Knesset simply don't have the time or political bandwidth to deal with them before the budget deadline.

Housing prices are rising. Food prices are rising. Inflation is now at 5%, a 15-year high.

The fixed price of basic milk, which is set by the government, is slated to rise a whopping 16% on May 1. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has blamed the rise on the previous government and sought to find ways to cut the increase in half to just 8%. But he made the demand this week, barely three days before the increase will go into force.

“The finance minister had three months to prepare,” complained one Agriculture Ministry official to the religious-Zionist website Kipa. “At the last minute, he wants to do it by fiat.”

Everything that depends on the cost of milk — cheese, yogurt, ice cream — will soon see similar cost increases.

And on the right, no one seems to be seriously addressing the problem.



File: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich give a press conference at the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem on January 11, 2023. (Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90)

“Between the judicial reform, the draft law [to exempt Haredim from military service] and the debates over the speeches at Memorial Day ceremonies, the government has managed to neglect the cost of living,” accuses one prominent column — in Israel Hayom, Netanyahu’s most supportive Hebrew-language newspaper.

The column doesn’t mince words, and captures some of the tension at the heart of the coalition: “There are funds for increasing the stipends of yeshiva students, but not enough to fulfill one of [Netanyahu’s] most prominent promises — free education from 0 to 3.”

The point isn’t simply that the coalition is saddled with a global economic slowdown, but that its own internal makeup makes it unable to deal seriously with the crisis.

Lifting Israel’s onerous import restrictions could help reduce the cost hikes, but it won’t happen in the coming budget. Meanwhile, the government’s promises to the Haredi parties are preventing it from taking other measures that might help, such as adding competition to the state kashrut monopoly, a key cause of Israel’s relatively high cost of dairy production. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich’s slashing of a tax on sugary drinks last month at the behest of Haredi politicians cost the state NIS 800 million (\$220 million) in immediate revenues and billions added to healthcare outlays in the future. And it’s no populism or prejudice to note that the vast stipend increases to Haredi communities helped transform last year’s balanced budget into this year’s looming deficit.

The coalition, in other words, is entering a period of economic turbulence trapped in a strait-jacket of its own making. It has spent too much of its bandwidth and political capital on a single policy issue at the expense of nearly everything else. It can’t now advance the kind of deregulation steps and spending cuts that might bring down consumer prices in a sustained way.

The government is now being held together by these very failures and by the coalition members’ fear of the growing frustration among its own electorate.





Ultra-orthodox Jews block a road during a protest against the ultra-Orthodox draft bill, outside the city of Bnei Brak, February 9, 2022. (Flash90)

## The tipping point

Yet if the government doesn't get its act together, this stability is unlikely to last. Israeli coalitions have a funny way of unraveling unexpectedly. Declining poll numbers are a stabilizing force for a coalition — right up to the moment when they're not. It only takes one coalition party concluding that the government is irredeemably floundering, that it won't be able to turn things around and that it's therefore in its political interest to jump ship and position itself as a critic of the flailing coalition. Everything then unravels very quickly.

The last days of an Israeli coalition are a kind of prisoner's dilemma: The mere suspicion that someone else is planning to jump first could trigger a race for the door.

That basic dynamic is what brought down the last government. A handful of right-wing coalition lawmakers concluded that the government's internal

tensions were not going to be resolved, that stability was not in the cards, and that therefore their only path to political rehabilitation lay in being the ones who bring it down.

If Netanyahu can't stop the bleeding in the polls or the price increases at the supermarket, how long before Itamar Ben Gvir or Bezalel Smotrich conclude that it's better to face the voter as a critic of a feckless government than as participants in its failure?

## **The audience**

All of which brings us back to Thursday's protest.

The protest was many things to many different parties.

Levin and other judicial-reform diehards saw it as a warning to Netanyahu, who they've long suspected would buckle under the strain of opposition protests. Their message is blunt: This is where the base is. You disappoint us at your political peril.

Netanyahu himself, whose staff and party apparatus helped organize the event, sent a message to the other members of his coalition: This is still a viable alliance and the first to jump ship will be the one betraying this now-mobilized public.



Supporters of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government gathered in Sderot on April 20, 2023. (AP/Tsafrir Abayov)

It was, too, a message to the opposition: We can draw crowds just like you. The reform is paused, not canceled. Once the state budget is passed and the government stabilized, the judicial fight will return, and this time we'll be in the streets just as much as you.

Or as the right-wing author Gadi Taub put it in his address to the protestors, "We won a mandate to push through this reform and then they tried to suppress it by force. Those weren't protests, they were a coup... But they pushed us to find each other, to unite around a goal, and to be more determined for next time. This is the start of a new campaign in this struggle."

But perhaps the most important message was in what was missing from the protest.

As many observers noted, most of the demonstrators were religious Zionists and so-called “Haredi-Zionist,” voters for the far-right factions of Religious Zionism: Voters for Smotrich and Ben Gvir.

The Haredi community and Likud’s non-religious base were conspicuously underrepresented.

Three months ago, the Haredi parties Shas and United Torah Judaism were at the forefront of the reform demanding the passage of a 61-vote override of High Court decisions.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Knesset Speaker Amir Ohana (right) celebrate with Emunah Cohen, winner of the International Bible Quiz, April 26, 2023. (Haim Zach/GPO)

When their own power and their community’s special privileges suddenly became central to the anti-overhaul protests, they quickly retreated from the fight.

Haredi party officials now speak relatively openly about how the reform was mishandled, how populist rhetoric and illiberal proposals, including by Haredi

MKs swept up in the triumph of the November 1 election victory, only served to convince half the country the overhaul was a war on them.

Haredi politicians no longer speak in eager terms of the reform itself. They are focused laser-like on their most urgent priority: Passing a draft law confirming their community's exemption from military service — and doing so quickly, before the government destabilizes or anti-Haredi sentiment leaks too deep into Likud's own voter base, as polls suggest might already be happening at the margins.

As one headline from pro-Netanyahu newspaper Israel Hayom blared on April 18, "Talks break up over draft law that could topple the government." Passing a draft law, Shas, UTJ and Netanyahu all understand, could easily set the nation's streets aflame once more, and it's not clear the protestors would hail solely from the opposition.

The government, the Haredi parties now fear, may already be a lame duck.

Likud voters, meanwhile, are frustrated that the great ideological battles being waged by the coalition are happening seemingly at their expense. Inflation and the price of milk worry them; everything else, they've been telling pollsters for a month now, can simply wait.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife Sara at the 75th anniversary Independence Day ceremony, held at Mount Herzl, Jerusalem on April 25, 2023. (Kobi Gideon/GPO)

Where does all that put Netanyahu? The Haredi parties want a draft law desperately, their desperation a function of growing uncertainty that the coalition will survive for much longer. Levin and the government's religious-Zionist wing — the majority of Thursday's protestors — want the judicial reform advanced urgently and are convinced Netanyahu is trying to retreat. Likud's own base is desperate to see serious action on rising food and gasoline prices.

Four months ago, most Israelis told pollsters they supported some form of judicial reform. The government squandered that broad agreement and the trust required to act on it with astonishing speed and efficiency. It neglected a deteriorating economic situation and a rising terror wave and now finds itself struggling to show its own shrinking and frustrated base that it can deliver for them.

Netanyahu, beset on all sides by these incompatible priorities, must find a path through the mire. Allies are watching carefully for signs that they should bolt. The coalition's long-term viability is questioned even in loyal right-wing newspapers.

Thursday's protest in Jerusalem was an impressive demonstration of popular support for the judicial reform, but simultaneously a showcasing of all the gaps and anxieties that risk tearing the coalition apart.