

Protesters want Netanyahu out. Israel's increasingly dysfunctional government makes that almost impossible

A prime minister as unpopular as Netanyahu shouldn't be able to hold onto power — so why does his grip seem so secure?

By [Dan Perry](#) April 1, 2024



Israeli forces arrest anti-government protesters blocking a road in Jerusalem on Monday during a sit-in near the Knesset calling for Netanyahu's ouster. Photo by Menahem Kahana / AFP

Political protests can generate an overpowering euphoria. Passionate people, often young and idealistic, swear to each other that tomorrow will be different: Together, they'll change the world.

And then tomorrow comes, and the world is as before.

That, unfortunately, is the most likely outcome for the masses of Israelis that have descended upon Jerusalem

with political demands, most prominently the resignation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — at least in the short term.

I've attended many anti-government protests in the last year or so, both before the war — as thousands gathered weekly to protest a [planned authoritarian overhaul](#) of the court system — and since its onset. They are an intoxicating confection of Israeli flags and rousing speeches and nostalgic Israeli music. They are about little children on the shoulders of parent protestors who see themselves, with not-unjustified arrogance, as the best version of Israel — the spiritual (and in some cases actual) heirs of the founders of the country.

And they may, for all that profound goodwill, not achieve any of their ends — even though the recent tension within Netanyahu's government over a possible end to the Haredi draft exemption has given them new reasons to hope.

No more Netanyahu?

What do the tens of thousands of protesters who descended on Jerusalem this weekend want?

Many of them, quite clearly, are the same protesters who targeted Netanyahu for months before Oct. 7. Now, already predisposed to distrust the prime minister, they suspect him of dragging out the Gaza War because he thinks doing so will buy him more time in office — and thus a better position from which to argue for postponements in his ongoing trial on corruption charges.

They want him gone.

But Netanyahu, who in the 1990s argued for term limits, would prefer to stay until the next regularly scheduled vote, in 2026, and protesters have limited means to force him to rethink that plan.

Netanyahu has progressively weeded out politicians who might stand against him from his Likud Party. The only member of his coalition of 63 backers in the Knesset — out of 120 members — who has shown signs of dissent is Yoav Gallant, the ex-general defense minister. Even without Gallant, Netanyahu would hold on to a majority in power.

If they can't get Netanyahu ousted from office, they at least want him to do more, visibly and persuasively, to aim for a deal with Hamas for a return of at least some of the more than 130 hostages remaining in Gaza (many of whom the military says have died). That message received new force this weekend, when the families of many of the hostages joined in the demonstration.

They also consider that after almost six months of war against an enemy that has no tanks or planes, and yet is somehow managing to continue firing rockets at Israel, the war is not going well.

Israel is badly isolated internationally, especially after the United Nations Security Council voted in favor of a ceasefire resolution last week. Netanyahu is [at loggerheads](#) with Israel's main global defender, President

Joe Biden; countries that previously had steady relationships with Israel, like Canada, are [ending arms sales](#); there is a [genocide investigation](#) against Israel at the Hague; and international economic sanctions are becoming far from impossible to contemplate.

Protesters want everyone to understand that Netanyahu's path has created a disaster, and they want the stubborn premier to admit even an ounce of responsibility for the epic breakdown of security, intelligence and strategy that was Oct. 7.

Roadblock upon roadblock

Yet with all these genuine complaints against him, there's little chance that Netanyahu will face enough internal pressure within the government to consider standing down.

Yes, some expect the Haredi parties in Netanyahu's coalition to threaten to bolt if the government fails to pass a law formalizing the sector's mass draft evasion, after the Supreme Court last week brought the [policy close to a legal end](#). And that may yet occur, if the government is unable to find a workaround.

But don't be surprised if they stay put. After all, nothing better awaits them in the opposition; their perceived indifference and arrogance has too greatly angered the other side. (Plus, some 70% of Israelis support an end to the Haredi draft exemption.)

It's also true that some religious right wingers who are not Haredi have made common cause with the protesters over wanting an end to the Haredi draft exemption. Overall, three-quarters of Israelis want the prime minister to go.

But all the protesters and polls and polemics will still likely crumble before practicalities.

You could have armies invading and inflation at a thousand percent and the power grid collapsing and a plague of locusts looming, and nothing would change if Netanyahu was able to keep his 60-odd lawmaker lemmings in line.

That inertia is making Netanyahu's opponents a little crazy. In a presidential system, like the American one, it's expected that nothing can be done until the next election. But in parliamentary systems, governments as cataclysmic as this one are supposed to fall or resign. That's why, before the war, Israel had five elections in four years. Stasis in the face of mass displeasure is not supposed to be a real possibility.

But stasis there is, and not just because Netanyahu has managed to keep his coalition so docile.

He has another major asset, which is that while Israelis may have collectively soured on him, most would have trouble agreeing on a different war policy. There has simply not been an offer from Hamas that they would want their country to accept — because Hamas continues to demand that Israel leave Gaza and end the war, with the group bruised but unbeaten.

So long as Netanyahu's war continues to look like a war most Israelis realistically support — one that strives for the eradication of Hamas — turning rage at him into practical change will be all but impossible.

What options are left, other than enduring what looks like madness for almost three more years? Only that of a military coup, which some protesters sound like they almost hope for. That is a sign of desperation, not a plan. Because Israel is so desperately divided between liberals and traditionalists in their various stripes, it's less clear than ever what a common future might look like — even if, as the protest chants soar above Jerusalem, some demonstrators begin to look like they have hope.

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