In Israel, democracy still holds

The achievements of Israeli demonstrators show that its political centre is healthier and far more vital than elsewhere in the democratic world

Even Israel's vehement critics might pause and marvel at what ordinary Israelis achieved this week.

After weeks of mounting demonstrations against the government's judicial-reform bills, hundreds of thousands took to the streets Sunday night – proportionally, as if millions of Americans were on the march – when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he would fire his defence minister, Yoav Gallant, for backing away from the legislation.

The demonstrators were joined by labour unions, who went on a nationwide strike that shut down the country's main airport; and by diplomats, who shut down Israeli consulates and embassies; and by at least some reservists, who threatened to refuse call-up orders. This was as close to a revolution as the modern state of Israel has ever seen.

A chance for genuine dialogue?

On Monday, Netanyahu blinked, saying he would postpone the legislation to 'take a timeout for dialogue'. In a better world – or a younger Israel – he would have resigned. As a matter of politics, he turned what should have been an electoral mandate for stability, security and economic growth into a fiasco for his own partisans. As a matter of statesmanship, he brought Israel to the brink of disaster for the apparent sake of his personal legal expediency and the ideological fixations of some of his criminal, extremist, lowlife coalition partners.

Still, he blinked.

That deserves a measure of respect. Yes, it isn't clear whether he means to have a genuine dialogue with the opposition or merely manoeuvre for tactical political advantage, and Israelis should be wary of every word he

utters and every step he takes.

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But it's more than can be said for President Emmanuel Macron of France, who defied huge public protests and his own parliament to enact his controversial pension reforms. Or for President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico, who rammed through legislation to gut the country's electoral institutions, also over huge protests. Or for a certain former US president, who incited a mob to overturn the results of a democratic election.

If Israel's democracy is to be judged, let it at least be judged against other democracies. By that standard, it may be in better health than is sometimes believed.

This is true in at least three respects.

First, Israel's demonstrators were not against the status quo or 'the system'. On the contrary, they came out to defend it. At every protest, marchers waved Israeli flags. I have seen no reports of serious property damage or physical injury, much less of death. The government and its allies have tried to dismiss the demonstrators as 'leftists'. It's a preposterous claim when critics of the judicial reforms include right-wing former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and a dozen former National Security Council chiefs, such as former Mossad chief Yossi Cohen and others who served directly under Netanyahu.

In other words, this was a revolt of the political centre against the fringe – showing that the former is far more vital and energised than it is elsewhere in the democratic world.

Room for compromise

Second, principled opponents of the government will often concede that there is a reasonable case to be made in favour of some type of judicial reform. The Israeli Supreme Court is unusually powerful, and it is legitimate in any democracy to question and sometimes move the boundary lines among executive, legislative and judicial powers. Benny Gantz, a former defence minister and one of the leaders of the political opposition, has noted that 'a majority of Israeli citizens, at least 80 per cent, agree on 80 per cent of the issues' in terms of the reforms.

So, there's ample room for compromise. With broad consultation and a clearer process, court restructuring could win broad support. But Netanyahu's efforts will never escape the taint of partisanship and self-dealing if he continues to grab for the ability to overturn court decisions with the slimmest parliamentary majority while potentially appointing judges in his own corruption trial.

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Third, Israelis appreciate that their physical security rests less on their military power than on social trust; that even bitter political rivals must recognise each other as comrades in arms. Netanyahu acknowledged as much when he warned last week that the refusal of reservists to serve put the state itself in 'terrible danger'. A Jewish state that loses the trust of half of its citizens – particularly the wealthier, more secular and more globally mobile half – will do itself in even before its enemies do.

Most Israelis, who grow up with the understanding that their country's margin of safety is unusually narrow, know this; it's only opportunists and fanatics who forget. This week, the demonstrators reminded them that raw majoritarianism puts everyone at risk.

On Sunday, Israeli writer Amotz Asa-El of the Shalom Hartman Institute pointed out to me that ancient Israel endured 12 civil wars, beginning with the war between the tribe of Benjamin and the rest of Israel (Judges 19-21) and ending with the fighting among the Jewish militias in Jerusalem during the Great Revolt against the Romans. 'That's an average of roughly one war every four generations', he said.

In May, Israel will turn 75 – three generations, at least. It's too soon to celebrate a victory, but the Israelis who have taken to the streets may have spared their country from repeating that history.

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This article is part of a series of articles on the reform protests in Israel.



Bret Stephens

Bret Stephens is an opinion columnist at The New York Times. He won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary at The Wall Street Journal in 2013 and was previously editor in chief of The Jerusalem Post.