



MIDDLE EAST

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Israel's 'social protests' rattle Netanyahu government

By Wyre Davies
BBC News, Tel Aviv

Last Saturday, hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets of a Middle Eastern city.

Demanding change, they were fed up with the ruling elite and said their government was no longer listening to its people.

But this was not Egypt, Tunisia or Libya. This was Israel.

If the Israeli government had hoped the street protests, which began three weeks ago, would lose momentum and fade away, it has not happened.

An estimated 300,000 people from different backgrounds joined the latest marches across the country.

Just as their counterparts did five months ago in Cairo's Tahrir Square, Israeli demonstrators

have taken over the heart of Tel Aviv.

Revital Len-Cohen is an educated woman, a lawyer whose husband works in Israel's booming high-tech sector. By her own admission she never thought she would find herself protesting on the streets.

But Mrs Len-Cohen has a young son with severe learning difficulties. She has had to give up work and gets little or no support from the state.

That, she says, is why she has spent a week in a small tent on the street.

"I'm really desperate. This is a country where we pay our taxes and do our best but we're now in a position where I'm having to beg from my parents to survive," the mother-of-two told me as she sat under the hot, midday sun.

Non-political

People here have many different grievances. Each part of the protesters' tented city, along Tel Aviv's Rothschild Boulevard, is home to a particular group with an axe to grind.

Just along from a group of tents where Mrs Len-Cohen and other parents of disabled children sleep, is a group of students.

A little further on are families who cannot afford the spiralling cost of renting even the most basic of homes.

Students, mothers, doctors, anarchists - all protesting about the cost of living.

Critics say their demands are unrealistic, especially when there is a deeper, global, economic crisis.

Others insist this is a battle for the soul and direction of Israel.

They say their "movement" is deliberately non-political. It is not about Israel and the Palestinians but normal Israelis concerned that their country is losing all sense of moral and collective responsibility.

Partly promoted through social media, comparisons are inevitably made with the Arab Spring.

The goals, circumstances and even the conclusion may be different, but the genie of protests is out of the bottle.

Caught off-guard

Israel is a country where a tiny minority of families and individuals control a hugely disproportionate amount of wealth.

That in itself is not unusual: income disparity and unfairness can be found in most countries, those who criticise the demonstrators' "naivety" point out.

But Israel is a young country founded on strong ideals of social responsibility and cohesiveness. The demonstrators in Rothschild Boulevard want their country back.

By the government's own admission, it was caught somewhat off-guard as the protests grew. There was, initially, incredulity among ministers in the governing coalition.

In many ways Israel's economy has been immune from the global crisis. The much-vaunted high-tech sector is still growing and official unemployment levels are much lower than in other developed countries.

Belatedly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has acted. He has promised to reassess his government's priorities. But whether that means, for example, diverting funds away from the bloated defence budget towards social policy, remains to be seen.

Mr Netanyahu has also appointed a "panel of experts" to meet protest leaders and assess their demands. The panel is led by Professor Manuel Trajtenberg, from Tel Aviv University.

He is reported to have initially rejected the offer, fearful it would become just another, ineffective Israeli inquiry - kicked into the long grass, its recommendations never to be taken up.

It was only when Mr Netanyahu promised to change his own fundamental positions that the respected professor changed his mind and agreed to lead the task-force.

As the Arab Spring leads to an Israeli Summer, there is no threat yet to the survival of the Netanyahu government.

However, with protests spreading to Jerusalem and other major cities, pressure is building.

Even bigger marches are planned for the coming weeks.

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