



ZU-LAT
Equality and Human Rights

My Country Has Changed Her Face

Israel's Regime Becomes
Competitive Authoritarian

Executive Summary

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Introduction

The report asserts that the regime in Israel can no longer be defined as "flawed democracy" but rather as "competitive authoritarianism". It is a hybrid civilian regime, which although it retains democratic institutions perceived as an arena for political contestation, these are systematically abused by the government to create a significant advantage over its rivals. Thus, competition still exists but it is unfair by accepted standards and is not conducive to genuine competition. Unlike an overt declaration of regime change, such as the Hungarian prime minister's "illiberal democracy" speech, Israel has seen no such official proclamation. However, the change has occurred in practice, owing to the policies pursued by the 37th Israeli government and the prime minister heading it.

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The conceptualization of the current regime in Israel is based on a theoretical model developed by American scholar **Prof. Steven Levitsky, one of the world's most prominent political scientists, and his colleague Prof. Lucan Way**, who coined the term "competitive authoritarianism" in their research on democratic regression. According to them, a regime is competitive authoritarian when it meets the following benchmarks:

1. Formal democratic institutions continue to exist

Elections are held and there is a functioning parliament, as well as media and judiciary.

2. The government abuses these institutions

They are ill-used to provide a significant advantage to the ruling party.

3. The political competition is unfair

The opposition is allowed to run, but the "playing field" is clearly tilted in favor of the government.

4. It is a persistent course of action

These are not isolated steps, but a systematic strategy to undermine checks and balances.

Many Israeli citizens feel that their country has changed its face but wrestle with how to define its new character. We set out to answer this question using prominent examples from Israel and theories developed around the world. An accurate definition of the nature of the regime is essential to enable an effective public debate on the actions required to confront and resist it.

On an historical level, the regime in Israel is situated on the continuum between democracy and authoritarianism. Although freedom, equality, and minority rights were proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, Israel has in effect shifted between democratic and authoritarian components over the years: a military government in Arab localities until 1966 and control over the Palestinian territories since 1967, alongside political and economic liberalization, growing independence of supervisory institutions, and Supreme Court jurisprudence anchoring human rights (within the Green Line).

A blend of democratic and authoritarian elements has shaped the character of Israel's political regime since the inception of the state. However, over the past 16 years, most of them under Netanyahu's leadership, the balance has steadily shifted toward the authoritarian pole, a trend that strengthened upon the formation of the 37th government in early 2023.

The report describes three phases in the changes undergone by the Israeli regime since 2009, when Netanyahu began his second term as prime minister:

1. Since 2009

Exploitation of existing authoritarian components, wrecking of public norms, and restrictions on public authorities and gatekeepers.

2. As of the 2015 elections and the intensification of the criminal investigations against Netanyahu and his family

A prolonged political crisis that included five election cycles within three and a half years, accompanied by venomous and inciteful campaigns against the judiciary, gatekeepers, and media.

3. Since the formation of the 37th government and the announcement of the regime revolution in January 2023

The ensuing mass protests impeded the finalization of the legislation contained in Justice Minister Yariv Levin's plan (override clause, restructuring of the Judicial Selection Committee, abolition of the reasonableness standard, and more). At the same time, however, the government adopted a series of anti-democratic administrative decisions and made numerous political appointments. As of August 2024, it launched a renewed blitz of anti-democratic legislative proposals, many of them submitted as private member bills that bypass standard scrutiny procedures. Although the Supreme Court struck down the law abolishing the reasonableness standard that was passed by the Knesset, other legislative amendments were enacted that deepened the politicization of the appointment of judges and of the Judiciary Ombudsman, as well as the allocation of the Bar Association's budget. These were compounded by the decision to dismiss the Attorney General and the appointment of a political loyalist as head of the Shin Bet. The sum total of these and other measures created a critical mass that changed the nature of the regime.

Democracies in Crisis: Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Brazil, and the American Case

The developments in Israel cannot be divorced from a worldwide context, whereby democratic regression is a global phenomenon according to various international reports. Research literature (Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, Daniel Ziblatt, and others) describes the rise of competitive-authoritarian regimes, where formal democratic institutions become power consolidation tools, mainly by altering the rules of the game, the politicization of institutions and law enforcement authorities, and constant efforts to seize control of the media sphere.

Examples can be found in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey: Hasty constitutional changes, weakening of the judicial

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system, politicization of government regulation, economic pressure on the media, measures harming academic freedom, and restrictions on civil society. In Brazil, for instance, President Jair Bolsonaro's use of disinformation and the country's security forces, damage to the environment and indigenous populations, and attacks on the judiciary culminated in the events of 8 January 2023, when his supporters stormed state institutions after he lost the election. In the United States, there has been a normative decline marked by the proliferation of presidential executive orders bypassing Congress, politicization of the Department of Justice and law enforcement agencies, and Supreme Court appointments undercutting human rights, investigative and prosecutorial processes, and judicial review. Thus, despite significant differences with regard to circumstances of regime change from one country to another, the toolkit used by the-powers-that-be to dismantle democratic norms is strikingly similar.

Israel: From Flawed Democracy to Competitive Authoritarianism

The report includes numerous examples from the actions of the 37th government to illustrate the abuse of democratic institutions and the alteration of the rules of the game. It focuses on the primary modus operandi: a "blitz" of administrative decisions and legislative initiatives. Even if eventually dismissed, the relentless barrage serves to normalize such proposals, divert public attention, erode trust in the gatekeepers, and distort the character of state institutions.

At the same time, it is important to remember that Israel has four fundamental problems hindering the stability of its liberal democracy and which have contributed to the emergence of a competitive-authoritarian regime:

1. The occupation regime

First and foremost, the separation between the regime effective within Israel's borders and the prolonged military rule over the Palestinian population in the territories since 1967 must be recognized as artificial. The control over inhabitants of occupied territories deprived of political rights, the illegal and internationally unrecognized annexation of East Jerusalem, Israel's continuous and systematic violation of the civil and human rights of the Palestinian population, the privileges accorded to the Jewish population based on criteria that effectively deny equality before the law (in the context of an apartheid-like policy), and the permanent state of emergency and emergency regulations that infringe on human rights - all of these factors make any discussion about the nature of Israel's regime and the quality of its democracy highly complex and problematic (some would even term it essentially meaningless in such circumstances).

2. Absence of a constitution

Basic human and civil rights are still not firmly and mandatorily enshrined in its constitution or Basic Laws.

3. Reliance on British Mandate-era legislation

Key state bodies, such as the Israel Police, operate under laws hailing back to the pre-state era that have been only partially or inadequately amended, which give room to ambiguity and are not suited to a democratic regime.

4. Political normalization and inclusion in government of anti-democratic Kahanist movement

In the run-up to the formation of the 37th government, the prime minister's quest for political survival under the pall of criminal proceedings aligned with the ideological interests of the Kahanist movement and elevated it to the center of public discourse and legitimacy.

To diagnose and characterize the current state of the regime, the report maps out the actions of Netanyahu's government that have infringed on democracy along several pivotal lines. To start with, harm can be identified at the very core of democracy, at the very ability to hold fair elections, through a combination of moves (such as attacks on the judicial system, incitement against Israel's Arab citizens, and more), coupled with the wrecking of democratic institutions and proper governance, due to the abuse of access to state resources. Another layer is the damage to the independence of the judiciary and law enforcement authorities, and their subordination to the political echelon, further compounded by steps to undermine free press.

harm can be identified along several pivotal lines: At the very ability to hold fair elections; the wrecking of democratic institutions and proper governance; the damage to the independence of the judiciary and law enforcement authorities; and the steps to undermine free press

Undermined ability to hold fair elections: Elections are held and these remain competitive, but the conditions for fairness are eroding.

The politicization of the Judicial Selection Committee affects the independence of the Supreme Court, which oversees the integrity of elections. We see campaigns against the Central Elections Committee and its judges, initiatives to expand grounds for disqualification or exclusion, primarily targeting Arab candidates and parties, as well as campaigns to delegitimize political cooperation with the Arab public and the Left. There is extensive use of disinformation, dubious voter-data collection strategies, and anonymous propaganda, not to mention past efforts to hinder political participation (such as raising the electoral threshold and placing cameras at polling stations in Arab communities). These are coupled by attempts to unseat and delegitimize elected opposition figures as part of an effort to shape public perceptions, even when it is clear that such attempts will not attain a majority and will not be endorsed by the courts.

Abuse of access to resources: Proliferation of appointments of political cronies to temporary positions and sidestepping of professional qualification standards; efforts to weaken the status of legal counsels in government ministries and turn them into political positions of trust, effectively canceling their role as gatekeepers overseeing the legality of the government's actions, proper governance, and prevention of conflicts of interest and corruption; politicization of the Government Companies Authority and the proposed "Jobs Law" (allowing for the unlimited

appointment of rabbis at the discretion of the Minister of Religious Affairs); use of coalition funds and sectoral budgets to create political dependency, such as the political ranking of municipalities and promotion of projects contrary to professional recommendations under a so-called "traffic-light system."

Politicization of the judiciary and law-enforcement authorities: Restructuring of the Judicial Selection Committee, legislation impacting on the Bar Association, selection of the Judiciary Ombudsman by a committee headed by the Justice Minister, and advancement of measures to limit judicial review (in connection with the reasonableness standard and the doctrine of standing). In parallel, delays in judicial appointments and personal campaigns targeting the Attorney General, including the attempt to unseat her that was halted by a Supreme Court interim order, as well as the ouster of the head of the Shin Bet and his replacement with a political loyalist, compounded by relentless and extremist pronouncements by government ministers against the judiciary. Since the amendment of the Police Ordinance and the appointment of Itamar Ben-Gvir as National Security Minister, the Israel Police have become a political arm of the government, especially through his control over officer appointments and promotions and his interference with operations (such as heightened use of force against protesters), concurrently with the creation of a "National Guard" used for political needs and to suppress protests. There are efforts to subordinate the Israel Police's Internal Investigations Department to the Justice Minister and divest it of some investigative powers, as well as to grant full criminal immunity to Knesset members, particularly in cases of leaks of classified information to government ministers, thus blurring the imperative line between professional judgment and political considerations and deterring investigators and prosecutors.

Assault on free media: Similarly to the blitz of measures aimed at weakening the judiciary, the gatekeepers, and law enforcement authorities, the government floods the system with legislative initiatives and administrative decisions intended to weaken the free media in Israel. Two primary types of assault can be identified:

1. Delegitimization of journalists and media outlets critical of the government via inflammatory rhetoric, conspiracy theories, myriad defamation lawsuits by senior officials (which produce a significant chilling effect, even if they are eventually dismissed), and a rise in attacks on news crews in the field.
2. Deep restructuring of the media market via economic and regulatory means: Initiatives to harm public broadcasting, regulatory and financial benefits to certain broadcasters, attempts to force private companies to advertise on a specific channel, political appointments in supervisory bodies, and legislation subordinating regulators to the political echelon. In addition, under cover of the war, measures were adopted to shut down foreign channels, halt broadcasts, seize equipment, and directives requiring prior censorship approval. The cumulative result is reflected in Israel's record low ranking in the World Press Freedom Index: 112th out of 180 in 2025.

Conclusion

The state of the regime is still reversible, as Israel has not yet become a full dictatorship. The process described in the report is not inevitable: there is still functioning and active opposition, elections are still held, and formal democratic institutions still exist. However, authoritarian elements have grown stronger and become dominant and systematic. The alteration of the rules of the game, the politicization of institutions, the violation of political competition terms, the selective use of law enforcement, and the assault on the free media lead to the conclusion that a threshold has been crossed changing the definition of the regime in Israel, which in this document we have characterized as competitive-authoritarian.

To confront this kind of regime, one cannot wait for another "red line" to be crossed. Every adverse measure, be it legal, administrative, or rhetorical, must be challenged via legal, parliamentary, and civic means, while institutions capable of halting it still exist. The Knesset, judicial review, regulators, protests, demonstrations, and the press must all be utilized to expose the government's failure to run the state due to unprofessional political appointments and the prioritization of loyalty over competence.

Over time, these appointments, laws, and destruction of public norms create a new reality. With the government seeking to normalize and entrench this situation, a reversal will be extremely difficult. Therefore, as long as these changes are still new and ongoing, persistent action is required to thwart them.

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Zulat institute works to promote a policy of equality and human rights and to restore the legitimacy of the human rights discourse in Israel.

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