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Equality and Human Rights

My Country Has Changed Her Face

Israel's Regime Becomes
Competitive Authoritarian

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Foreword

In January 2023, just days after the formation of the 37th government, former Supreme Court President Aharon Barak said in an interview that the closest equivalent to Justice Minister Yariv Levin's package of legislative proposals was "a revolution with tanks."¹ Three years later, Barak declared at a rally that Israel is "no longer a liberal democracy," given that "our system of governance is a rule of one political branch, which in practice is controlled by one man, the same one who rules the government and the Knesset."²

The State of Israel is changing its face, and rapidly at that. The political reality is spiraling into a vortex before our very eyes, growing ever more intense, divisive, and violent, and jeopardizing institutions, liberal-democratic practices, the freedoms of Israel's citizens, and their safety. Both in timing and content, the exceptional speech that Barak chose to deliver to protesters on 3 January 2026 encapsulates the sense of urgency and the magnitude of the dangers facing the state and Israeli society. It was preceded by an equally unusual petition signed by 142 retired judges (from all court levels), drafted and circulated to the public following the attack by Minister Bezalel Smotrich on Supreme Court President Yitzhak Amit, whom he accused of trying to "steal Israeli democracy" and vowed to "trample."³

The legislative blitz set in motion after the government's formation, which paused following the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack and the ensuing war, resumed in earnest ahead of January 2025, with the onset of the first phase of the ceasefire. Even amid a prolonged war, the inhumane captivity of Israeli hostages, unprecedented devastation and death in Gaza, surging crime within Israel, and daily settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, often alongside the military, the government remained unwaveringly focused on its goal. The assault on the rule of law, the destruction of the balance between the branches of government, the attacks on the free press and attempts to reshape it, have sowed unrest and advanced the dismantling of erstwhile accepted norms. All of these are progressively leading us toward the consolidation and expansion of what Barak defined as a one-man rule.

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The collapse of democracy in Israel is the result of a process deliberate and forcefully pursued. This is not to suggest that Israel's system was fully democratic in the past. According to Pseudo Democracy, a report published by Zulat in 2022, Israel's regime has always been located on a continuum between democracy and authoritarianism, combining elements of both whose quality and quantity varied across different periods in the state's history. The report indicated that the authoritarian aspects of the regime's character steadily strengthened and remained on that trajectory from 2009 to 2021, after Netanyahu's return to the premiership.⁴

1. References in *English and **Portuguese. All other references in this document are in Hebrew.

TOI Staff, **Ex-Chief Justice Barak: Government's Judicial Reform Plan 'Will Strangle Democracy'*, *The Times of Israel* (6 Jan 2023).

2. The Liveblog, **Ex-Chief Justice Barak: Israel 'No Longer a Liberal Democracy,' Is Now Under PM's 'One-Man' Rule*, *The Times of Israel* (3 Jan 2023).

3. Unattributed, **Smotrich: Supreme Court Chief Is 'Violent Megalomaniac,' Government Will 'Trample' Court*, *The Jerusalem Post* (29 Dec 2025).

4. Eitay Mack, **Pseudo Democracy: State of the Regime in Israel*, *Zulat* (23 Jun 2022).

Unlike Hungary's Viktor Orbán, who in a speech kicking off his fourth term as prime minister openly announced the end of "liberal democracy" in his country,⁵ Prime Minister Netanyahu has not explicitly declared a change in Israel's system of government. Nevertheless, the policies he has openly and aggressively advanced since the formation of the 37th government have led to precisely that outcome, as this report will explain.

Indeed, three years after the government's formation, Israel has not yet become a full dictatorship where the opposition cannot exert any influence, and remains a hybrid regime that still incorporates certain democratic components. However, it can no longer be defined as a flawed or partial democracy of the familiar kind (such as an illiberal democracy, an electoral democracy, or a partially free democracy), since its authoritarian components have become too dominant and systematic. In other words, Israel has shifted from a flawed democracy to a flawed or partial authoritarian regime.

This document contends that on the basis of the institutional changes already enacted and the main strategies employed by Prime Minister Netanyahu to entrench his rule, Israel's regime best conforms to a competitive authoritarian system, as defined by scholars Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way.⁶ This characterization is based, among other things, on the fact that the regime is civilian rather than military, formal democratic institutions still exist and are used by Netanyahu's government as the primary means for acquiring power and controlling the state, their abuse gives the government a significant advantage over its political rivals, and the regime remains competitive insofar as opposition parties can still attempt to use democratic institutions to vie for power. At the same time, the regime is not democratic, because the "playing field" is heavily tilted in favor of the government. In other words, political competition still exists, but it is changing form, narrowing, and widely being regarded as unfair by accepted standards.

This document contends that on the basis of the institutional changes already enacted and the main strategies employed by Prime Minister Netanyahu to entrench his rule, Israel's regime best conforms to a competitive authoritarian system

The next elections, if held, will determine the fate of both the written and the unwritten social contract, anchored in legislation and in Israeli culture since the country's founding, between the state and its citizens and for their benefit, fragile as it has always been.

5. Darko Janjevic, *Orban: Era of 'Liberal Democracy' Is Over, DW (5 Oct 2018).

6. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War, Cambridge University Press (2010).

Introduction: Israel's flawed democracy slides into authoritarianism

The State of Israel has from the start affirmed its aspiration toward the democratic model. Consequently, such democratic values as liberty, equality, minority rights, justice, and peace were enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, even though the character of the regime was not explicitly defined therein.

In practice, throughout its existence as a sovereign state, Israel has not upheld a proper form of democratic governance that fully realizes the ideals set out in the Declaration of Independence.⁷ As a result, Israel has frequently moved along the continuum between two poles: democracy on the one hand and authoritarianism on the other. According to accepted criteria, this complexity is defined as a hybrid regime, combining democratic and authoritarian elements simultaneously and in varying proportions. Thus, alongside military rule over Israel's Arab minority until 1966 and the occupation of the Palestinian territories since 1967, political and economic liberalization and democratization processes were advanced, state institutions and the media increased their independence from the ruling party, and a long series of human rights were recognized by the Supreme Court. These and similar changes point to a sustained (though not always continuous) move toward liberal characteristics within Israel's internationally recognized borders, similar to what happened throughout the Western world after World War II.⁸

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However, in the 16 years since Netanyahu returned to the premiership in 2009, Israel has experienced profound changes. During this period, the core structure that had shaped Israel's democratic character in the spirit of the Declaration of Independence was fundamentally altered, and the pendulum shifted permanently toward the authoritarian pole.

Later in this document, we will elaborate on the far-reaching changes that led to a redefinition of the regime type. By way of background, we will begin by broadly delineating three stages in the evolution of the Israeli regime between 2009 and 2025, most of which coincided with Netanyahu's tenure as prime minister.

1. 2009-2015

As detailed extensively in Zulat's report *Pseudo Democracy*, after returning to the premiership in 2009, Netanyahu exploited existing authoritarian components and spearheaded legislative and public initiatives that undermined the rules of the game. Authoritarian elements that were already present were bolstered through actions taken by his successive governments to weaken such democratic institutions as the Knesset, the judiciary, the media, and civil society

7. Noam Gidron and Yaniv Roznai, *Democracy in Retreat: Populism, Polarization, and Judicial Overhaul*, *Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir* (2025).

8. As will be explained later in this document, any discussion of the nature of the regime and the quality of democracy in Israel is highly complex and deeply problematic in light of its control over the occupied territories since 1967, which entails the denial of human rights to the Palestinians living there alongside the conferment of preferential rights to Israeli settlers in the same territory.

organizations, and to reshape the relationships among them. These actions were also intended to harm minority groups, primarily Israel's Arab citizens, and to strengthen majority rule.⁹

2. 2015-2021

The turning point marking the transition to the second stage of the slide toward authoritarianism unfolded against the backdrop of the 2015 elections, amid polling suggesting that Netanyahu's coalition was headed for defeat. This trend continued throughout the entire period, and from 2018 onward a prolonged political crisis evolved that, by its very nature, weakened and destabilized the government and its institutions. The three-and-a-half years between 2018 and 2021 saw five rounds of Knesset elections and three caretaker governments headed by Netanyahu. At the same time, this period saw a surge in investigations and criminal proceedings against Prime Minister Netanyahu, members of his family, and associates: "The Residences Affair,"¹⁰ "The Submarines Affair,"¹¹ the indictment against Sara Netanyahu and subsequent plea bargain,¹² the police recommendation to indict Netanyahu and Noni Mozes,¹³ the indictments against Netanyahu on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust in 2019 and the start of his trial at the Jerusalem District Court in 2020.¹⁴ All of these had a significant impact on the conduct of the government and the man heading it.

During this stage, the preservation and enhancement of majority power were carried out through a clear departure from the norms that had characterized previous governments and had shaped Israel as a state oriented toward liberal democracy. The weakening of Israel's democratic components and its slide toward the authoritarian pole was deliberate, gradual, and ever-growing.

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9. Eitay Mack, "Pseudo Democracy: State of the Regime in Israel," *Zulat* (23 Jun 2022).

10. "The Residences Affair": Criminal case exposed in 2015 in which Sara Netanyahu was convicted for ordering meals and private chefs to the prime minister's official residence at public expense between 2010 and 2013, in violation of regulations. In 2019, under a plea agreement, she admitted to an amended indictment, was fined, and reimbursed part of the funds to the state.

11. "The Submarines Affair": Corruption scandal exposed in 2016 centered on a multi-billion-dollar deal between the Israeli government and the German industrial firm ThyssenKrupp for the purchase of naval vessels, despite objections from the defense establishment. While it involves serious allegations of bribery and conflicts of interest among high-ranking officials close to him (such as his lawyer and cousin, David Shimron), Netanyahu himself has not been indicted in this specific case.

12. See footnote #10.

13. Known as "Case 2000," the affair involves alleged negotiations between Netanyahu and Noni Mozes, publisher of Yedioth Ahronoth, over favorable media coverage in exchange for legislation harming rival Israel Hayom. Although the deal never materialized, recordings uncovered in 2017 are cited by prosecutors as evidence of mutual intent. Netanyahu was indicted for fraud and breach of trust, and Mozes for attempted bribery, in November 2019; their trial began in May 2020.

14. Netanyahu was investigated in five different cases, three of which were brought to trial. In addition to the aforementioned Case 2000, Case 1000, opened in December 2016, involves valuable gifts and presents that Netanyahu and his wife received from two wealthy businessmen over the years. In Case 4000, launched in 2017, Netanyahu is suspected of advancing regulatory decisions benefiting Bezeq, Israel's largest telecommunications company, in exchange for favorable coverage on the news website Walla, both owned by businessman Shaul Elovitch, despite opposition from Communications Ministry professionals. In November 2019, Netanyahu was officially charged with fraud and breach of trust in Cases 1000 and 2000, and with fraud, breach of trust, and receiving bribes in Case 4000.

Among other things, a coordinated and intensive campaign was launched against the so-called "deep state", which became a defamation and delegitimization crusade against the professional echelons throughout public authorities and government ministries, as well as against officials involved in the investigations and criminal prosecution of Prime Minister Netanyahu.¹⁵

As part of this campaign, proposals were raised (beginning in 2017) to convert the job of legal counsels in government ministries into positions of personal trust, thereby making legal advice more flexible and stripping advisers of their function as gatekeepers. At the same time, senior Likud figures called for noncompliance with Supreme Court rulings,¹⁶ with one such ruling actually violated in 2020 when, despite a court order, the Knesset Speaker refused to convene the plenum to elect a successor.¹⁷ In addition, there were attempts to change the composition of the Judicial Selection Committee.¹⁸

In parallel, social media was used extensively to monitor the public discourse and at times to silence or to incite against speech perceived as contrary to Likud's interests, including through the use of trolls. These steps were also intended to undermine media independence and to exclude the Israeli Left (human rights and other left-leaning organizations) from the public sphere. Efforts also intensified to enact discriminatory legislation designed to bolster the government by neutralizing and excluding Arab voters from elections.¹⁹

3. January 2023 and Thereafter

The regime revolution, which has been going on for three years, marked a major escalation in the efforts to bring about fundamental and institutionalized changes to the characteristics of Israel's regime. The opening shot was fired immediately after the swearing-in of the 37th government, on 4 January 2023, when Justice Minister Yariv Levin announced the "judicial reform" at a press conference,²⁰ followed by the presentation of the first phase of its implementation in April 2023.

Minister Levin proclaimed that his "judicial reform" would change the composition of the Judicial Selection Committee, enact an "override clause", and limit the Supreme Court's authority to strike down Basic Laws or invoke the reasonableness standard. He also declared that he would seek to convert legal counsels in government ministries into a minister's positions of personal trust. He justified the fact that he had not consulted the President

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15. Eitay Mack, **Pseudo Democracy: State of the Regime in Israel*, *Zulat* (23 Jun 2022).

16. Unattributed, *'Not Every Law Must Be Enforced': Incoming Justice Minister Amir Ohana's Pronouncements Against the Judiciary*, *Haaretz* (6 Jun 2019).

17. The Liveblog, **Edelstein: Court Undermining Democracy's Foundations, But I Won't Allow Anarchy*, *The Times of Israel* (25 Mar 2020).

18. Eitay Mack, **The Regime in Israel: Borderline Authoritarian State Headed Toward Dictatorship*, *Zulat*, (7 Sep 2023).

19. Eitay Mack, **Pseudo Democracy: State of the Regime in Israel*, *Zulat* (23 Jun 2022).

20. Jeremy Sharon, **Justice Minister Unveils Plan To Shackle the High Court, Overhaul Israel's Judiciary*, *The Times of Israel* (4 Jan 2023).

of the Supreme Court by arguing that the electoral majority given to the government obviated the need to hear out the judiciary.²¹ Levin thus confirmed the government's ambition to uproot the principle of separation of powers and to disrupt the system of checks and balances conceived by Montesquieu in the 18th century that became a cornerstone of the modern democratic state: preventing any single actor from concentrating all authority in its hands. Without checks and balances among the different branches of government, each confined to its role, there can be no guarantee against tyranny or the erosion of citizens' liberties.

Following the outbreak of widespread public protests after the announcement of the regime revolution, the government had a hard time completing the legislative moves it had planned. A significant law that was given final approval by the Knesset prior to

the Hamas attack in October 2023 limited judicial review under the reasonableness doctrine, but it was struck down by the Supreme Court sitting as the High Court of Justice by a majority of 8 out of 15 justices.²²

After October 7 and during the first months of the war, the regime revolution was advanced mainly through appointments and administrative decisions (to be detailed below), without major legislative proposals. However, in August 2024, Minister Levin declared that he had not abandoned the "judicial overhaul,"²³ and the "blitz" of anti-democratic bills has continued since then. Most were submitted as private members' bills rather than government bills, thereby providing a bypass route around the customary scrutiny processes exercised by the professional echelons within the government and by the public.

As a result, laws with far-reaching implications were passed regarding the politicization of the Judicial Selection Committee, political control over the Judiciary Ombudsman, and political control over the budget of the Israel Bar Association.²⁴ In addition, numerous bills were submitted that threaten the character of Israel's regime and are at various stages of the legislative process. These include, for example, a proposal to grant MKs immunity from investigation and prosecution even for serious offenses (2024);²⁵ bills aimed at harming public broadcasting and the free press, such as the Broadcast Media Law and a bill to shut down the news broadcasts of the Kan Corporation (2025);²⁶ a proposal to subordinate Mahash (Israel Police's

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21. Tova Zimuki, *Judicial Revolution Public Again After Months Under the Radar*, *Ynet* (25 Jul 2024).

22. Supreme Court, *Ruling and Summary in Case HCJ 5658/23: Repeal of Reasonableness Standard Law*, *Judicial Branch* (1 Jan 2024).

23. Jeremy Sharon, **Justice Minister Calls for Revival of Judicial Overhaul After IDF Soldiers Accused of Abusing Palestinian Detainee*, *The Times of Israel* (1 Aug 2024).

24. Eitay Mack, **Government Advances Takeover of Israel Bar Association Through Budget Control*, *Zulat* (4 Nov 2024).

25. Eitay Mack, **Proposed Amendment of Immunity Law: Turning the Knesset Into a Safe Haven for Criminals*, *Zulat* (28 Jan 2025).

26. Ronen Reingold, **Proposed Broadcast Media Law: Attempt To Ravage Free Media in Israel*, *Zulat* (31 Jul 2025); Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, **Bill To Shut Down Kan Corporation's News Broadcasts: Another Effort to Harm Public Broadcasting and Free Media*, *Zulat* (13 Jun 2025).

Internal Investigations Department) to the Minister of Justice;²⁷ and bills to curtail and weaken the role of the Attorney General and of the legal counsels in government ministries.²⁸ Furthermore, draconian bills are being promoted to impose a substantial tax on donations to civil society organizations, which would lead to a blatant violation of the principle of equality and to the classification of organizations according to loyalty-to-the-government criteria.²⁹

At the same time, the government has commandeered democratic institutions through appointments and administrative measures, such as the decision to fire the Attorney General and the Shin Bet chief and replace them with political loyalists. While the Attorney General has been struggling to serve her full term normally (the government effectively treats her as if she has already been fired, even though her

dismissal was struck down by the Supreme Court),³⁰ the head of the Shin Bet was replaced by Netanyahu's nominee, Major General (res.) David Zini, whose appointment was accompanied by legal proceedings and public controversy. This followed the resignation of the previous Shin Bet chief, Ronen Bar, despite the Supreme Court's finding that the dismissal process initiated against him had been improper and unlawful.³¹

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To sum up, democratic components in Israel have been supplanted by the core elements of any authoritarian regime, which will be detailed later in this document: a system ruled by a single leader who controls the country's wealth and power centers, arbitrary conduct and trampling of the rule of law according to the ruler's wishes and the needs of his associates, extensive oversight and regulation of the private and public spheres without checks and balances, and widespread use of law enforcement agencies to monitor and scrutinize civic activity in general and actions framed as opposition to the regime in particular.

Whereas up to the third stage the government's efforts focused mainly on their weakening, since the formation of the 37th government (and even after the outbreak of the war in October 2023) those labors have been directed toward seizing control of democratic institutions through legislation, appointments, and administrative decisions. This modus operandi, in our view, necessitates a redefinition of Israel's regime as competitive authoritarian and a clarification of its characteristics.

27. Eitay Mack, **Subordination of Mahash to Minister of Justice: Proposal for Government Takeover of Prosecution Authorities*, *Zulaf* (18 May 2025).

28. Nili Aleksandrowicz and Eitay Mack, **Law To Neutralize Legal Counsels in Government Ministries: Seeks Subordination to the Political Echelon*, *Zulaf* (20 Jul 2025); Yifat Solel, **The Laws To Split the Attorney General's Position: Abolishment of Independence*, *Zulaf* (6 Nov 2025).

29. Eitay Mack, **Amendment to Associations Law: Spells Elimination of Civil Society Organizations*, *Zulaf* (19 Feb 2025); Shira Kadri-Ovadia, *Government's 'Cruel Choice' - Silencing Criticism or Shutting Down: Associations Law Returns to Knesset*, *Ynet* (21 Jul 2025).

30. Chen Maanit, **Israel's High Court Annuls Netanyahu Government's Firing of Attorney General, Ruling It 'Unlawful'*, *Haaretz* (14 Dec 2025).

31. Netael Bandel, *Netanyahu to Supreme Court: Failure To Remove Ronen Bar Would Harm National Security Irreversibly*, *Ynet* (6 Apr 2025).

Although considerable public attention is directed at the regime revolution laws being promoted in the Knesset, it bears remembering that a country's statute book alone cannot guarantee the nature of its regime. Below we will also cite examples of countries that have constitutions or laws enshrining human rights and a democratic system of government, yet whose regimes have become competitive authoritarian. In this context, it merits quoting the report of the Shamgar Commission set up to look into the appointment of an Attorney General: "The main guarantee we have for the proper functioning of institutions is the integrity, professionalism, reliability, responsibility, wisdom, and judgment of the officeholders in question. Existing rules, whether statutory or conventional, are only intended to facilitate the correct conduct of officeholders and to set signposts and reminders. The operation of complex systems such as those we are discussing is in any case determined by governance culture and actual practice, not by the wording of the laws and their legal enforcement. Therefore, a proper system of rules should serve the function of the lock in the well-known parable by Professor Benjamin Akzin: even the most sophisticated steel door will not prevent a determined, skilled, and persistent burglar from breaking in.... A system seeking to protect itself must therefore equip itself with reasonable locks and make every effort to ensure that its officeholders are not primarily engaged in efforts to break them open."³²

This report does not purport to detail the entire political and historical sequence of the democratic backsliding in Israel or the full range of its manifestations. Nor is it an academic study or a comprehensive comparative global analysis. The purpose of this

document is to answer, via salient examples from Israel and theories developed worldwide, the question pondered by many Israeli citizens who feel that their country has changed its face, but struggle to define its new one. An appropriate definition of the nature of Israel's regime is essential for conducting an effective public discussion about the actions required to confront it.

32. *Report of Public Committee on the Appointment of Attorneys General and Related Issues*, Ministry of Justice (1998).

On the emergence of competitive authoritarian regimes

Theoretical Aspects: Democratic Erosion Begins Slowly and From Within

Democratic backsliding worldwide, as well as in Israel, is displacing the post-World War II paradigm whereby countries exhibited an incremental strengthening of liberal institutions alongside the expansion of a world order based on political and economic cooperation.³³

The transformation observed in recent years reflects the consolidation of populist dynamics, deepening polarization, and the elevation of previously marginal authoritarian elements into dominant features of governance. This is a new type of pseudo democracy, one that is weakened from within, gradually and deliberately, by a government that seeks not only to preserve its grip on power but also to "shape the truth," as historian Anne Applebaum argues.³⁴ No longer violent military revolts or palace coups, but rather preservation of formal democratic structures, foremost among them elections, and abuse of those structures in order to gradually erode the power of political rivals, the media, and civil society organizations, including with the help of conspiracy theories. The legislature thus gradually turns from an independent and balancing branch of government into an empty vessel, the independence of the judiciary and the "gatekeepers" is destroyed, trust in them is eroded, and state mechanisms are politicized.

This is a new type of pseudo democracy, one that is weakened from within, gradually and deliberately, by a government that seeks not only to preserve its grip on power but also to "shape the truth"

Steven Levitsky's research with Lucan A. Way³⁵ and with Daniel Ziblatt³⁶ has addressed this democratic backsliding. The term they coined, "competitive authoritarianism," is intended to characterize civilian (non-military) hybrid regimes where formal democratic institutions still exist, but are used by the government as the primary means for accumulating power and controlling the state, and whose abuse places the government at a significant advantage vis-à-vis its political rivals. Such regimes are competitive because opposition parties are still able to use democratic institutions to seriously vie for power, yet they are not democratic because the "playing field" is heavily tilted in favor of the government. In other words, political competition still exists, but it is unfair.

The researchers emphasize that formal democratic institutions serve as a primary instrument for accumulating political power, through simultaneous weakening and capture, and they point to the use of additional tools, such as ongoing efforts to seize control over the media.³⁷

An important distinction in this scholarship concerns the fundamental difference between a flawed democracy where the basic rules of democracy, albeit polarized and enfeebled, are

33. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press (1992).

34. Anne Appelbaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*, Doubleday (2020), p. 17.

35. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press (2010).

36. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, Crown Publishing Group (2018).

37. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*, *Journal of Democracy* 13:2 (2002), pp. 51-65.

still preserved, and a flawed competitive authoritarian regime where the rules themselves are violated and abused for the purpose of entrenching power.

The motivation for preserving democratic institutions in competitive authoritarian regimes hinges on the ability to maintain a semblance of pluralism and competition and to neutralize potential protest. This applies to elections, which continue to be held but confer an advantage on the ruling party, and likewise to the media sphere. In this context, the existence of a press that is not formally "nationalized" serves a dual role: it allows a façade of adherence to democratic rules, and it is used to incite against and denounce independent journalists critical of government policy, portraying their criticism as endangering the state and its citizens.

The motivation for preserving democratic institutions in competitive authoritarian regimes hinges on the ability to maintain a semblance of pluralism and competition and to neutralize potential protest

The shift toward authoritarianism varies from case to case, but its hallmarks are clearly traceable. While the structures of formal institutions provide the same misleading semblance of pluralism, the gradual change in the democratic game rules is characterized by dynamic moves that can be summarized as follows:

- Elections are held amid a steady erosion of the guardrails ensuring their fairness, game rules reshaped through the politicization of state institutions and their exploitation for partisan needs, including via appointments and allocation of resources.
- Persecution of government critics and attempts to limit media independence, favoritism toward pro-government media, delegitimization of media outlets and actors defined as "rivals" or "enemies of the nation."
- Calls to curtail citizens' rights and even adoption of concrete measures to that end, in particular restrictions on freedom of protest.

It should be emphasized that there is broad agreement among scholars studying democratic backsliding worldwide that shifts from liberal democracy toward authoritarianism are not an inevitability, and that despite democracy's fragility the situation is reversible.³⁸

Shifts from liberal democracy toward authoritarianism are not an inevitability, and despite democracy's fragility the situation is reversible

38. Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons From the Twentieth Century*, *Tim Duggan Books* (2017).

Democracies in Crisis: Competitive Authoritarian Regimes Worldwide

The weakening of Israel's democratic foundations is a process, whose beginnings we briefly outlined, that has been ongoing since Netanyahu's return to power as prime minister in 2009, and even more so since the opening of criminal proceedings against him in 2015. Yet while the motivations and characteristics of democratic erosion in Israel are local, it is also one case within a broader phenomenon that has been developing in various countries around the world in recent decades.

A 2025 report by the V-Dem Institute warned that the level of democracy for the average world citizen is back to 1985, and back to 1996 by country averages.³⁹ In 2024 the ratio between democracies and autocracies worldwide was the lowest in the past 20 years (88 versus 91), and liberal democracies were the least common regime type in the world (29 in total).⁴⁰ The Economist's 2024 Democracy Index similarly reported that the global quality of democracy fell to its lowest level since the index was first

published in 2009, as the number of failing democracies and hybrid regimes continued to climb.⁴¹

Levitsky and Way studied the factors leading to the emergence of "competitive authoritarianism" in dozens of countries around the world, including Turkey, India, El Salvador, Hungary, Poland, Benin, Honduras, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and others.⁴² According to their research, competitive authoritarian regimes began appearing at the end of the Cold War as a result of conflicting international and domestic incentives that created an interest for rulers to establish such regimes.

Competitive authoritarian regimes began appearing at the end of the Cold War as a result of conflicting international and domestic incentives that created an interest for rulers to establish such regimes

In the 1990s, Western countries provided international incentives for authoritarian regimes to undertake liberalization and to establish democratic institutions, at least formally. However, external pressures for democratization did not necessarily lead to genuine and full internal changes. International pressure was not uniform across all countries and varied according to interests. The main demand was to hold multiparty elections, which regimes often exploited to conduct elections that were only partially free and to operate flawed democratic institutions. The ruling elites sought to entrench their rule, and some countries lacked opposition forces or civil societies that were strong enough to compel meaningful change.

39. Marina Nord, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg, **Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization - Democracy Trumped?**, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute (Mar 2025).

40. Ibid, p. 6.

41. **EIU's 2024 Democracy Index: Trends of Global Democratic Decline and Strengthening Authoritarianism Continues Through 2024**, Economist Intelligence EIU (27 Feb 2025).

42. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, **Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism**, *Journal of Democracy* 13[2] (Apr 2002), pp. 52-65; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, **The New Competitive Authoritarianism**, *Journal of Democracy* 31[1] (Jan 2020), pp. 51-65; Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press (2010).

Conversely, some governments could not or did not wish to establish a full dictatorship to start with, in part due to a lack of sufficient power and control to impose one without provoking a widespread internal rebellion, due to fear of paying a heavy international and economic price, or because they had already secured their rule through a competitive authoritarian regime (that is, control via the use of existing democratic institutions).

With the ascendance of Russia and China in the early 2000s, an opposing trend emerged to the earlier global push for democratization. Opportunistically, these powers provided incentives for the establishment of authoritarian regimes and for strengthening authoritarian elements in various countries, which became more significant as the influence of the Western coalition declined. Among other factors, political crises, economic downturns, and the disastrous invasions and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan reduced the willingness of Western countries to seriously get involved in questions pertaining to the regime of countries with which they maintained relations. Additionally, some Western countries further lost their credibility and interest in "preaching" to others upon the rise of populist and authoritarian forces in their own midst.

Another factor that has contributed significantly to the growth of authoritarian regimes in the 21st century is social media.⁴³ A vast portion of the public in Israel and worldwide consumes news and forms opinions through these platforms, which is why they are a key tool for leaders seeking regime change. They enable to bypass established and independent media and to disseminate messages at tremendous speed, without any editorial filters or journalistic ethical standards, thereby shaping public opinion and the agenda. In fact, social media has become the central arena for overt and anonymous political campaigns worldwide, including in Israel, not only during election periods but at all times. Prime Minister Netanyahu is considered the Israeli politician most adept at using these platforms. He understands that whoever controls social media controls the public.⁴⁴

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According to Levitsky, recent years have seen democratic states of various types transitioning to competitive authoritarian regimes. Especially in countries where strong democratic institutions and culture existed, governments were required to exhibit greater sophistication to carry out the shift.

Hungary, Poland, Brazil, and Turkey are prominent examples of democratic backsliding. The Economist defines the United States under the Trump administration as a "flawed democracy",⁴⁵ while Levitsky, Way, and Ziblatt have already defined it as competitive authoritarian.⁴⁶

43. Lukas Andriukaitis, Jakub Kalensky, Simin Kargar, Elene Panchulidze, Joanna Smętek, Anastas Vangeli, **In-Depth Analysis: The Misuse of Social Media Platforms and Other Communication Channels by Authoritarian Regimes - Lessons Learned*, *European Parliament* (2021); Michal Evron Yaniv, **Fake News & the Violation of Human Rights: Challenges & Responses*, *Zulat* (23 Dec 2021).

44. Itay Asher, *The Comeback: On the Trail of Netanyahu's 11th Election Campaign*, *Kan 11* (1 Apr 2023); Podcast: *Netanyahu Has Fully Dominated Social Media Since 2015, But Against Hamas We Failed*, *TheMarker* (19 Oct 2023).

45. **EIU's 2024 Democracy Index: Trends of Global Democratic Decline and Strengthening Authoritarianism Continues Through 2024*, *Economist Intelligence EIU* (27 Feb 2025).

46. Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, **How Will We Know When We Have Lost Our Democracy?*, *The New York Times* (8 May 2025).

In every country that has become competitive authoritarian, the historical, economic, and social circumstances differ. However, the "toolbox" used by governments in transitioning to such a regime is similar, and therefore it is important to examine examples of changes in other countries to gain a deeper understanding of the emergence of competitive authoritarian regimes.

Hungary, Poland, and Turkey

The erosion of democracy in Hungary under Viktor Orbán (since 2010), in Poland under the rule of the Law and Justice Party (2015-2023), and in Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (as prime minister from 2003 to 2014, and with accelerating speed during his presidency since 2014 and an attempted military coup in 2016) was driven by local cultural and economic factors and unfolded under distinct historical and global circumstances, reflecting the unique character of each country.

International and domestic incentives for the emergence of a competitive authoritarian regime rather than a return to full dictatorship were present in all three countries. Internationally, all three are part of the Western bloc and two of them are members of the European Union, which is why a return to full dictatorship would have caused them enormous economic and diplomatic harm. Domestically, given Turkey's history of successive military regimes and of communist dictatorships in Poland and Hungary, an attempt to establish a full dictatorship would likely have provoked widespread internal rebellion. Particularly in the latter two, where certain democratic institutions and a measure of democratic culture already existed, the transition to such a regime required greater sophistication.

In all three countries, the government proceeded to violate the balance among the branches of government by shifting powers to the executive branch, while undermining the status and role of the legislature and the independence of the judiciary, and promoting fundamental changes in political processes and the game rules. In parallel, measures were taken to curtail the basic rights of citizens and of civil organizations.

For example, according to a special UN report on the protection of human rights in Hungary, from the time Orbán assumed office in 2010 until 2016, over 1,000 laws were passed in expedited processes, without a comprehensive debate or meaningful consultation with civil society. These legislative changes gradually removed major constraints on the executive branch, weakened the Constitutional Court, led to the concentration and tightening of government control over the

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judiciary, the media, religious organizations, and other areas of public life, directly or indirectly, and affected the state of human rights.⁴⁷

The weakening of the judiciary constituted a cardinal component of the slide toward authoritarianism in all three countries: in Hungary, a constitutional amendment granted the government authority to dismiss judges; in Turkey, masses of judges and prosecutors were dismissed following an attempted coup; in Poland, the government enacted reforms lowering the retirement age, enabling the early dismissal of judges, including those on the Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court, thereby effectively undermining their independence and subordinating them to the Law and Justice government, despite the narrow electoral majority that brought it to power. The appointment of a new president of the Constitutional Tribunal by sidestepping customary procedure and enacting new legislation contributed to the efforts to intimidate judges. The legislation was designed to punish and deter judges from issuing rulings contrary to government policy.⁴⁸

Dramatic situations, such as the attempted coup in Turkey and the Covid-19 pandemic in Hungary, were used as springboards to advance measures to weaken democratic mechanisms, not only by nominating judges based on loyalty to the ruling party and its interests and by limiting their ability to exercise constitutional review, but also through wide-ranging politicization of state institutions. This included political appointments,⁴⁹ erosion of the independence of public broadcasting and freedom of the press, interference in the activities of academic institutions and curbs on academic freedom, and limitations on civil society organizations, such as restrictions or bans on receiving foreign funding.⁵⁰

In Hungary, for example, 80% of local media is today under government control, following the closure of independent radio stations and newspapers.⁵¹ Poland fell between 2015 and 2022 from 18th to 66th place in the Press Freedom Index of

Reporters Without Borders.⁵² In Turkey, the struggle against free media has been an ongoing and escalating process that includes persecution and lengthy prison sentences for journalists and severe restrictions on independent media outlets. In 2024 alone, 181 journalists were prosecuted and 58 were imprisoned.⁵³

In all three countries, governments appealed to nationalist sentiments, hurled accusations against "the elites," and labeled political rivals, civil organizations, and publics critical of their conduct as enemies of the nation. These efforts were intended to mobilize as broad public support for the regime as possible. In all three countries, regimes made use of nationalist, religious, and

47. *End of Mission Statement by Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Visit to Hungary 8-16 Feb 2016, OHCHR (16 Feb 2016).

48. Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism, Doubleday (2020), pp. 1-21.

49. Miklós Bankuti, Gabor Halnai and Kim Lane Scheppele, *Disabling the Constitution, *Journal of Democracy* 23[3] (2012), pp. 138-146.

50. Berk Essen, *Judicial Transformation in a Competitive Authoritarian Regime: Evidence From the Turkish Case, *Law & Policy, Vol. 47 Issue 1* (8 Jul 2024).

51. Detmar Doering and Natalie Marakova, *Media Pluralism in Eastern Europe Under Pressure, *Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom* (17 Feb 2021).

52. Unattributed, *Poland Lowest in History in World Index of Press Freedom, *Warsaw Business Journal* (3 May 2022).

53. Unattributed, *Turkey Sentenced 58 Journalists to Prison, Arrested 26 in 2024, *Stockholm Center for Freedom* (2 Jan 2025).

conservative populism. In Poland and Hungary, the ruling parties conducted political campaigns inciting against the LGBTQ community and promoted legislation legitimizing its discrimination.⁵⁴ The Hungarian parliament approved a constitutional amendment banning pride parades and allowing surveillance of participants.⁵⁵ In addition, Poland and Hungary also saw prominent campaigns inciting against migrants and refugees. Another common denominator was the gradual use of democratic rules and institutions to prepare the ground for authoritarianism, and the effective emasculating of the democratic model itself.

In Hungary, alongside accelerated authoritarian processes and the capture of the courts and most private media outlets by loyalists and associates of Prime Minister Orbán and his Fidesz party, there was also a surge of defamation lawsuits by politicians seeking compensation for alleged damage to their reputations or attempting to silence or resolve political and social disputes through the courts. The International Press Institute (IPI) warned that this phenomenon harmed freedom of the press in Hungary, particularly political journalism.⁵⁶

In Poland, under the rule of the Law and Justice Party (2015–2023), there was a wave of defamation lawsuits against opposition activists, journalists, and media outlets. For example, the government-critical newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* had to contend with dozens of defamation lawsuits.⁵⁷ In addition, it was disclosed that the Pegasus surveillance system produced by the Israeli company NSO was used against politicians from opposition parties in Poland,⁵⁸ as well as against journalists, lawyers, and human rights activists in Hungary.⁵⁹

In Turkey, six months before the arrest of the popular mayor of Istanbul, President Erdogan sued him and the leader of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) for defamation.⁶⁰ In light of the arrests and harsh suppression of protests, the consensus expanded that Turkey's regime had completed its transformation into competitive authoritarianism.⁶¹

In all three countries, regimes made use of nationalist, religious, and conservative populism. In Poland and Hungary, the ruling parties conducted political campaigns inciting against the LGBTQ community and promoted legislation legitimizing its discrimination

54. Darnell Christie and Rachel Savage, *Timeline: How LGBT+ Issues Became a Flashpoint in Poland*, *Reuters* (10 Aug 2020).

55. Jakub Krupa, *Hungary Passes Constitutional Amendment Targeting LGBTQ Groups, Restricting Rights*, *The Guardian* (14 Apr 2025).

56. Bea Bodrogi, *Civil Defamation and Media Freedom in Hungary*, *International Press Institute* (Feb 2017).

57. Unattributed, *The Media Freedom Rapid Response Supports Gazeta Wyborcza in Poland*, *European Centre for Press & Media Freedom* (6 Jul 2020).

58. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, *Turkey: Municipal Revolution Rocking Erdogan's Throne*, *Israel Hayom* (1 Apr 2024).

59. Shaun Walker, *Viktor Orbán Using NSO Spyware in Assault on Media, Data Suggests*, *The Guardian* (18 Jul 2021).

60. Agence France-Presse, *Erdogan Sues Opposition Chief, Istanbul Mayor for Slander*, *VOA News* (1 Nov 2024).

61. Amanda Taub, *For Some Autocrats, Even Rigged Elections Can Be Too Much of a Threat*, *The New York Times* (28 Mar 2025).

Brazil

Jair Bolsonaro had served in Brazil's National Congress, where he was associated with the vociferous and marginal backbenches of the far right, since 1990. His election as president in October 2018, following a dubious military career and a long political career devoid of notable achievements, was enabled, among other factors, by the fading from public memory of the crimes committed by the military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985, as well as by an election campaign marked by disinformation and incitement on social media.⁶²

Prior to being elected president, Bolsonaro repeatedly voiced his support for torture, abolishing the democratic regime, curtailing women's rights and in favor of violence against women, for the denial of rights, political persecution, arrest and even killing of LGBTQ persons, left-wing and labor parties, indigenous groups, and Afro-Brazilians. Upon entering office, he appointed Ernesto Araújo, who claimed that global warming was a Marxist conspiracy,⁶³ as his foreign minister and published an article arguing that German Nazism and Italian Fascism were far left movements.⁶⁴ His finance minister, Paulo Guedes, expressed support for the economic policies of General Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile.⁶⁵

During his tenure, Bolsonaro repeatedly encouraged police violence. For example, in 2019 he promoted legislation granting police officers immunity from criminal proceedings if they killed civilians during operations,⁶⁶ and stated that he hoped criminals would die in the streets like cockroaches.⁶⁷ In early September 2019, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet expressed her concern about the surge in the number of people killed by police forces in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and criticized Brazil for "discourse legitimizing summary executions."⁶⁸

Due to the small number of seats his party won in congressional elections, Bolsonaro was limited in his ability to repeal environmental protection laws through legislation. Instead, he dried up the budgets of federal agencies in charge of environmental protection and indigenous populations and dramatically reduced enforcement against violators of environmental laws. The impact on the ground was severe: deforestation due to logging and arson surged massively during his tenure. In 2019, deforestation caused by arson intensified, consuming approximately 5,500 square kilometers of forest.⁶⁹ In response, the international community threatened to impose sanctions and cancel trade agreements.⁷⁰ In 2019, 24 environmental activists were murdered in Brazil.⁷¹

62. Jon Lee Anderson, *The Brazilian Judge Taking On the Digital Far Right*, *The New Yorker* (7 Apr 2025).

63. Jonathan Watts, *Brazil's New Foreign Minister Believe Climate Change Is a Marxist Plot*, *The Guardian* (15 Nov 2018).

64. Dom Phillips, *Jair Bolsonaro Says Brazilians 'Still Don't Know What Dictatorship Is'*, *The Guardian* (20 Nov 2018).

65. Andres Schipani and Joe Leahy, *Brazil's New Finance Minister Eyes 'Pinochet-Style' Fix for Economy*, *Financial Times* (2 Nov 2018).

66. Maria Carolina Marcello and Lisandra Paraguassu, *Brazil's Bolsonaro Unveils Bill To Protect Police and Soldiers Who Kill*, *Reuters* (22 Nov 2019).

67. Tom Phillips, *Jair Bolsonaro Says Criminals Will 'Die Like Cockroaches' Under Proposed New Laws*, *The Guardian* (6 Aug 2019).

68. Gabriel Stargardt, *Special Report: A Surge in Killings by Police Roils Bolsonaro's Brazil*, *Reuters* (9 Oct 2019).

69. *Letter on the Amazon and its Defenders to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)*, *Human Rights Watch* (27 Jan 2021).

70. Lisandra Paraguassu and Gabriela Baczynska, *As EU Threatens Trade Retaliation, Brazil Sends Army To Fight Amazon Fires*, *Reuters* (24 Aug 2019).

71. Eitay Mack, *Climate Crisis: This Is the Weapon*, *Zandberg, Haaretz* (24 Jun 2021).

In April 2020, President Bolsonaro declared at a cabinet meeting that he needed to replace the head of the federal police in Rio de Janeiro in order to protect family members under investigation, or otherwise he would replace the national police chief and the justice minister.⁷² Subsequently, Justice Minister Sérgio Moro resigned, citing Bolsonaro's interference in police investigations.⁷³

Bolsonaro appointed more than 6,000 individuals from active or reserve military service to positions in his government, including key roles in his cabinet. "We have the armed forces on the side of the people"⁷⁴ and "It is up to the armed forces to decide whether people live in a democracy or in a dictatorship,"⁷⁵ he stated at rallies in May 2020 and January 2021. In April and May 2020, as Bolsonaro lashed out at the Supreme Court, his supporters held rallies calling for military rule and for the closure of the Supreme Court and Congress.⁷⁶

The Bolsonaro administration sought to impose prison sentences on at least 16 of his critics, including journalists, university lecturers, and politicians. Although most of the cases were closed without filing indictments, these efforts sent a clear message: criticism of the president could lead to persecution.⁷⁷ In addition, in January 2024, Brazil's federal police chief Andrei Passos revealed that an Israeli-made surveillance system produced by the company Cognite was used during Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–2021) to spy on approximately 30,000 people without judicial authorization. Targets included civil servants, journalists, judges, Supreme Court justices, lawyers, politicians, a former state governor from the left-wing Workers' Party (PT), and police officers. The surveillance was carried out to harm political rivals, for purposes of corruption, and for the obstruction of criminal investigations, including those involving Bolsonaro's family.⁷⁸

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Bolsonaro stated in July 2021 that he would transfer power to whoever won the following year's presidential election fair and square and if there was no fraud, but at the same time he publicly

72. Ricardo Brito, **On Tape, Bolsonaro Cites Protecting His Family in Push To Swap Top Rio Cop - Source, Reuters* (13 May 2020).

73. Andrew Fishman and Cecilia Oliveira, **Brazil Justice Minister Resigns Over Bolsonaro's Interference in Investigations - And Impeachment Talk Ramps Up, The Intercept* (24 Apr 2020).

74. Talita Fernandes and Fábio Pupo, ***Bolsonaro Volta a Apoiar Ato Contra STF e Congresso e Diz Que Forças Armadas Estão 'Ao Lado do Povo', Folha De S. Paulo* (3 May 2020).

75. Pedro Henrique Gomes, ***Forças Armadas é Que Decidem se 'Povo Vai Viver Numa Democracia ou Numa Ditadura', Diz Bolsonaro, g1* (18 Jan 2021).

76. Rafael Moraes Moura, ***Ministros de Supremo Repudiam Ato a Favor de Intervenção Militar Visitado por Bolsonaro, Estadão* (19 Apr 2020).

77. News release: **Brazil: Crackdown on Critics of Covid-19 Response, Human Rights Watch* (28 Jan 2021).

78. Tom Phillips, **Brazilian Police Raid Bolsonaro Ally's Home Over Illegal Spying Allegations, The Guardian* (25 Jan 2024); Andréia Sadi, ***Espionagem Ilegal da Abin Atingiu 30 Mil Pessoas e Dados Foram Guardados em Israel, Diz Chefe da PF, g1* (25 Jan 2024); Tom Phillips, **Police Raid Villa of Jair Bolsonaro as Part of Spying Investigation, The Guardian* (29 Jan 2024); Naiara Galarraga Gortázar, **Police Investigate Brazil's Intelligence Chief Under Bolsonaro Over Claims of Political Spying, El País U.S. Edition* (26 Jan 2024).

attacked Brazil's voting system.⁷⁹ He also said that "Only God will remove me from power," and announced that he would not abide by any decision of Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes.⁸⁰ The latter had overseen federal police investigations into whether Bolsonaro had unlawfully interfered in internal appointments within the federal police for personal interests, had leaked a confidential federal police document for political motives, and had disseminated false information about the election campaign.⁸¹

Against this backdrop, after Bolsonaro lost the election and one week after the inauguration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on 8 January 2023, thousands of his supporters stormed and vandalized government buildings, including the Supreme Court, the presidential palace, and Congress.⁸² In September 2025, Bolsonaro was sentenced to 27 years in prison after being convicted of attempting to stage a coup.⁸³

United States

Although illiberalism has been an integral part of the United States since its founding,⁸⁴ its democratic backsliding under President Donald Trump surprised many. Assessing the country's situation according to widely accepted criteria distinguishing liberal from illiberal regimes, experts such as Levitsky, Way, and Ziblatt concluded that four months into his term, the United States had already crossed the line and was effectively functioning as a competitive authoritarian regime.⁸⁵ In another article published in December 2025, they wrote that the accumulated evidence confirmed that the United States had indeed transitioned to such a regime.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, there are others who argue that given the U.S. Constitution and federal structure, it is still too early to make such a pronouncement and that one should wait in particular for the 2026 midterm elections.⁸⁷

While the conclusions may differ, there is broad consensus on the reality of deterioration. Six weeks after the start of Trump's second term, V-Dem described the anti-democratic "blitz" as "the fastest evolving episode of autocratization the USA has been through in modern history" and termed the expansion of the executive

Six weeks after the start of Trump's second term, the research institute V-Dem described the anti-democratic "blitz" as "the fastest evolving episode of autocratization the USA has been through in modern history"

79. Unattributed, *"Brazil's Bolsonaro Says He Won't Hand Over Presidency If There Is Vote Fraud"*, *Reuters* (2 Jul 2021).

80. Unattributed, *"Brazil's Bolsonaro: Only God Will Remove Me From Power"*, *BBC* (8 Sep 2021).

81. Thomas Bustamante and Emilio Peluso Neder Meyer, *"The Brazilian Federal Supreme Court's Reaction to Bolsonaro"*, *Verfassungsblog* (26 Sep 2022).

82. Rob Picheta, *"The Violent Attack on Brazil's Government Was Months in the Making. Here's What You Need To Know"*, *CNN* (8 Jan 2023).

83. Tom Phillips, *"Bolsonaro Sentenced to 27 Years for Plotting Military Coup in Brazil"*, *The Guardian* (11 Sep 2025).

84. Steven Hahn, *"Illiberal America: A History"*, *W. W. Norton* (2025).

85. Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, *"How Will We Know When We Have Lost Our Democracy?"*, *The New York Times* (8 May 2025).

86. Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, *"The Price of American Authoritarianism"*, *Foreign Affairs* (11 Dec 2025).

87. McKenzie Carrier and Thomas Carothers, *"U.S. Democratic Backsliding in Comparative Perspective"*, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (25 Aug 2025).

branch's power, the weakening of Congress's budgetary authority, the attacks on independent institutions and the media, and the "purge" and dismantling of state institutions as classic authoritarian strategies.⁸⁸

Trump's attacks on the democratic system began already during his first presidential run and intensified immediately upon his inauguration in January 2017. Among other steps, he launched a campaign to undermine judicial independence and erode public confidence in the courts, for example, by using racist rhetoric to attack the judge presiding over the Trump University case.⁸⁹ He appointed three conservative and highly contentious justices to the Supreme Court in an effort to reshape the institution, and vowed to overturn a federal judge's ruling that had blocked a presidential order banning the entry of immigrants from Muslim countries.⁹⁰

He also interfered with the FBI's investigation into suspicions that his advisers had conspired with the Russian government to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, by firing FBI Director James Comey in 2017.⁹¹ The criminal charges filed against Comey at Trump's urging (September 2025) were ultimately dismissed by a federal judge on procedural grounds.⁹²

In addition to targeting the independence of the judiciary and law enforcement, Trump's first term was characterized by harsh rhetoric on social media, public speeches, and media appearances against political opponents, universities, elites, and civil society organizations, against entire publics, minorities and immigrants, and against media outlets and journalists. He displayed deep contempt for law enforcement institutions and denounced core values of liberal democracy.

After his defeat to Biden in the 2020 presidential race, Trump launched a public campaign alleging fraud and falsification of the vote. His refusal to accept the outcome and the accusations made in that context paved the way for his supporters' assault on the Capitol on 6 January 2021, during the certification of the results. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt's criteria, when a defeated leader refuses to accept election results and encourages supporters to fight, this is the moment when democracies collapse, because this constitutes a breach of the fundamental norm and neces condition for the existence of elections: civic and political acceptance of political competition.⁹³

Since the start of his second term in January 2025, Trump has acted vigorously, forcefully, and rapidly, using a wide array of tools and wholesale violations of accepted rules to distance the United States from the liberal democracy model.⁹⁴ His administration adopted a broad range of

88. Marina Nord, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg, **Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization - Democracy Trumped?**, University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute (Mar 2025).

89. Stuart Taylor, Jr., **Why Trump's Assault on the Judiciary Is the Most Dangerous Thing He's Done**, *Politico Magazine* (7 Jun 2016).

90. Terry Carter, **Judicial Independence 'Not Up for Negotiation,' ABA President Says in Speech Addressing Trump Tweets**, *ABA Journal* (6 Feb 2017).

91. Michael D. Shear and Matt Apuzzo, **FBI Director James Comey Is Fired by Trump**, *The New York Times* (9 May 2017).

92. Eric Tucker, **Judge Dismisses Cases Against James Comey, Letitia James After Finding the Prosecutor Was Illegally Appointed**, *PBS* (24 Nov 2025).

93. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, **How Democracies Die**, Crown Publishing Group (2018), p. 102.

94. Andrew Marantz, **Is It Happening Here?**, *The New Yorker* (28 Apr 2025).

swift measures to weaken or dismantle the professional civil service, such as dismissal or prosecution of senior officials under the banner of combating waste⁹⁵ (it created a "Department of Government Efficiency" or DOGE) and use of conspiracy theories about a "deep state." Trump's efforts are directed at federal institutions and carried out by changing laws, norms, and game rules. According to estimates by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management from November 2025, 317,000 federal employees left government service during 2025 alone, while only 68,000 new ones were hired to fill the vacated positions.⁹⁶ Most of these measures are advanced through presidential orders

that bypass Congress and the Senate. The number of presidential orders issued in the first 100 days of Trump's second term is unprecedented compared to any previous administration, and according to *The New York Times*, they have done more damage to American democracy than anything else since the demise of Reconstruction after the Civil War.⁹⁷

The Trump administration adopted a broad range of swift measures to weaken or dismantle the professional civil service, such as dismissal or prosecution of senior officials under the banner of combating waste

Moreover, these presidential orders violate the principle of checks and balances by granting excessive authority to the presidency and administration officials. Examples include an order revoking a prior one issued by the Biden administration that was intended to ensure transparency at the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), which oversees U.S. stock exchanges and public companies, and requiring it to act according to the interpretation of the President and/or his Attorney General.⁹⁸ Like the SEC, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which regulates communications infrastructure to ensure such principles as accessibility and fair competition, had operated as an independent agency until the new order, after which it was compelled to act in accordance with the directives of the President and the Attorney General.

Trump also proceeded to hire and fire officials in key positions within U.S. federal agencies, including civil servants in law enforcement bodies and the military, by invoking an expansive interpretation of the Unitary Executive Theory, which grants the President extraordinary executive powers even when they do not align with constitutional norms.⁹⁹

For example, he has made extensive and political use of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and National Guard forces, and has already deployed them to "enforcement and removal operations" in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., and has even threatened to act in Chicago and other cities dominated by the Democratic Party, in defiance of the position of local authorities and law enforcement agencies and the majority of local residents.¹⁰⁰

95. Steven Levitsky, Lucan Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, *"How Will We Know When We Have Lost Our Democracy?", The New York Times* (8 May 2025).

96. Courtney Rozen, *"US Government To Shed 317,000 Workers This Year, Trump HR Chief Says, Reuters* (24 Nov 2025).

97. The Editorial Board, *"There Is a Way Forward: How To Defeat Trump's Power Grab, The New York Times* (1 May 2025).

98. Jessica Glenza, *"Trump Signs Order Making Independent Regulators Answerable to White House, The Guardian* (19 Feb 2025).

99. Graham G. Dodds, *"The Supreme Court Is Headed Toward a Radically New Vision of Unlimited Presidential Power, The Conversation* (7 Oct 2025).

100. Jonathan Chait, *"Donald Trump Doesn't Really Care About Crime, The Atlantic* (11 Aug 2025).

As in other countries, the Trump administration made the Justice Department a central target for overt politicization. It fired senior executives from various divisions, including the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, and replaced them with loyalists. Open cases concerning electoral discrimination were closed, and near-blanket pardons were granted to defendants who had been tried and sentenced to prison for the 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol.¹⁰¹ The administration's incitement against judges, firing of civil servants, and sharp cuts in federal spending are aimed, among other things, at intimidating and influencing judicial officials and other gatekeepers.¹⁰²

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Following the appointment of three conservative justices during Trump's first term, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, which had provided federal constitutional protections to pregnant women seeking abortions.¹⁰³ It also ruled that President Trump was entitled to partial immunity from criminal prosecution for actions taken in his official capacity, a decision that led to leniency and the suspension of criminal proceedings against him in various cases, including his attempts to overturn election results.¹⁰⁴ Another ruling stipulated that federal judges were not authorized to issue nationwide injunctions to halt administration policies.¹⁰⁵

Yet another target has been academia. Since his return to office, the Trump administration has harshly attacked universities, particularly Ivy League institutions, and threatened to penalize them. Sanctions have included investigations into university policies launched by the Department of Education, threats and effective freezing of budgets, threats and termination of grants amounting to billions of dollars to research institutes operating within universities and of funding covering other routine activities, revocation of their tax-exempt status, and more. All these actions were justified by the argument that universities refused to comply with the administration's demands to restrict antisemitic activities on their campuses.¹⁰⁶

The administration's opposition to the concept of "wokeness," which promotes social and gender justice for minority groups, found legislative expression in Presidential Order 14173, which led to massive cuts to "diversity, equity, and inclusion" programs in federal institutions and the launch of investigations against at least 52 universities.¹⁰⁷ This was compounded by orders harming

101. Noah Weiland and Maggie Haberman, **Trump Pardons January 6 Rioters and Signs Order on TikTok*, *The New York Times* (20 Jan 2025).

102. Laura N. Perez Sanchez, **Attacks on Judges Undermine Democracy, Warns Justice Jackson*, *The New York Times* (1 May 2025).

103. Adam Liptak, **In 6-to-3 Ruling, Supreme Court Ends Nearly 50 Years of Abortion Rights*, *The New York Times* (24 Jun 2022); Lawrence Hurley and Andrew Chung, **US Supreme Court Overturns Roe v. Wade, Ends Constitutional Right to Abortion*, *Reuters* (25 Jun 2022).

104. Bernd Debusmann, **Trump Has Some Immunity From Prosecution, Supreme Court Rules*, *BBC* (1 Jul 2024).

105. Nina Totenberg, **Supreme Court Limits Nationwide Injunctions in Birthright Citizenship Order*, *NPR* (27 Jun 2025).

106. Avner Cohen, *100 Days Into Trump's Second Term: Blitz of Purges and Destruction*, *Haaretz* (28 Apr 2025); Collin Binkley and Michael Casey, **Trump Administration Bars Harvard From Enrolling Foreign Students, Including Current Ones*, *PBS* (22 May 2025).

107. Presidential Actions, **Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity*, *The White House* (21 Jan 2025).

human and civil rights, such as Presidential Order 14168, which rescinded federal recognition of transgender persons.¹⁰⁸

As part of his battle against the traditional press, President Trump filed a series of defamation lawsuits against media outlets, including ABC and CBS.¹⁰⁹ He also threatened to sue additional networks and to revoke ABC's broadcasting license after it aired an interview in which a former governor sharply criticized him.¹¹⁰

It is important to emphasize that these and similar moves are intended to change not only the social and cultural character of the United States but also its political structure. In this sense, the actions taken under the guise of fighting the elites, such as closures of institutions, dismissals, budget cuts, and the capture of cultural establishments (e.g., the Kennedy Center)¹¹¹ are also meant to prevent the emergence of a viable opposition to the current administration. This has led to a reality in which citizens and officeholders hesitate to voice criticism of government policy.

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108. Presidential Actions, **Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government*, *The White House* (20 Jan 2025).

109. David Enrich, **Trump's New Line of Attack Against the Media Gains Momentum*, *The New York Times* (7 Feb 2025); The Associated Press, **ABC Agrees To Give \$15 Million to Trump's Presidential Library To Settle Defamation Suit*, *First Amendment Watch at New York University* (16 Dec 2024).

110. Michael M. Grynbaum, **Trump Threatens To Sue The Times and CNN Over Iran Reporting*, *The New York Times* (26 Jun 2025); Liam Reilly, Alejandra Jaramillo, and Isabelle D'Antonio, **Trump Threatens Chris Christie and ABC News After Watching Critical 'This Week' Interview*, *CNN* (25 Aug 2025).

111. Andrew Marantz, **Is It Happening Here?*, *The New Yorker* (28 Apr 2025).

Game rules change: Israel's Regime becomes competitive authoritarian

Background to Strengthening of Authoritarian Tendencies

This document seeks to show how a competitive authoritarian regime has developed in Israel as well, similar to other countries with hybrid regimes that once leaned in a democratic direction.

Beyond certain similarities in the international and domestic incentives that contributed to this development, it is important to note that Israel faces four basic structural problems that impede the consolidation of a stable liberal democratic regime committed to the protection of civil and human rights and are closely linked to the regime's authoritarian drift. They are briefly reviewed below.

1. Occupation Regime and Permanent State of Emergency: First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that the separation between the regime operating within Israel's recognized borders and its prolonged military control over the Palestinian population under the occupation regime in the territories since 1967 is artificial. In the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and began ruling over nearly 5 million Palestinians. This population was never formally annexed to the State of Israel and has since lived under Israeli military rule (with the exception of the Gaza Strip after the Disengagement Plan, though it is not free of Israeli control). Under this setup, millions of Palestinian civilians are forced to live under a dictatorial military administration and edicts, with no option of participating in elections and without protections for basic human and civil rights. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in East Jerusalem were forcefully incorporated into Israel as permanent residents rather than citizens, without the right to vote for state institutions, without equal rights, and amid a violent and cruel separation from their families and communities in the West Bank.

Moreover, since the declaration of statehood and the outbreak of the War of Independence, Israel has existed under a constant state of emergency and recurrent wars of varying intensity. During the 1948 war, a military government was imposed on Arab localities and remained in place by virtue of the Emergency Defense Regulations until 1966.¹¹² Although some of these regulations were repealed over the years, those that remain in force (censorship, administrative detention, and infringements on property rights and freedom of association) grant the executive branch extraordinary powers in the name of security, public order, and governance, violate human rights, and are incompatible with a democratic state. These regulations are considered primary legislation and enjoy permanent status. In other words, their validity is not contingent on the declaration of a state of emergency. Bills proposing their repeal have been submitted over the years but the legislative process was never completed.

The military rule over the Palestinian population that is accompanied by systematic and continuous human rights violations by Israel and its security forces, the illegal annexation of East Jerusalem that is unrecognized by the international community, the allocation of differential rights within the Jewish population based on criteria that de facto negate equality before the law (as part of an apartheid policy), and the perpetual declaration of a state of emergency and use of draconian powers under the Emergency Defense Regulations - all of these continuously

112. [Emergency Defense Regulations 1945-](#), Nevo.

erode the quality of democracy within the State of Israel and render a debate about the nature of the regime and the quality of its democracy highly complex and problematic (some would argue even futile). They also serve government authorities as a constant pretext for the infringement of human and civil rights within the Green Line, particularly the rights of the Arab minority and its participation in the public and political spheres.

2. Absence of a Constitution: After 76 years, basic human and civil rights in Israel are still not firmly and comprehensively anchored in a constitution or in Basic Laws. Even those rights that have been legally recognized are vague and dependent on interpretation by the Supreme Court, which has infused existing laws with substantive content and has recognized rights, values, and democratic principles not explicitly enshrined in legislation. However, judicial interpretation can change and existing legal provisions can be interpreted in less democratic ways - a structural weakness that can be exploited to attack the Supreme Court. Prime Minister Netanyahu and opponents of stronger human rights use this weakness to portray the Supreme Court's justices in the media as exceeding their authority and seeking to run the state. The ambiguity in the definition of the powers of the three branches of government is also used to entrench the supremacy of the executive branch, thereby hollowing out the foundational principle of the democratic state model.

3. Reliance on Partially/Inadequately Amended British Mandate-Era Legislation: One of Israel's earliest laws (Law and Administration Ordinance-1948) applied the principle of legal continuity to British Mandate-era legislation and incorporated it into Israel's constitutional framework.¹¹³ As a result, central government bodies, such as the Israel Police, operate under laws originating in pre-1948 legislation that has undergone only partial or faulty updates and are therefore ill-suited to a democratic regime or contain broad provisions that can be interpreted in undemocratic ways.

While courts and attorneys general have generally provided democratic interpretations of British Mandate-era legislation and its amendments, the result ultimately is a fragile patchwork system that lacks clarity and stability. This reliance on legal interpretation has been exploited in the delegitimization campaigns waged by Netanyahu's governments against the judiciary and attorneys general, whose role is to prevent unlawful violations of human and civil rights.

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113. [Law and Administration Ordinance1948-](#), Nevo (last updated 7 Nov 2023).

4. Racist, Anti-Democratic Kahanist Stream Within Israeli Society: Rabbi Meir Kahane served in the Knesset from 1984 to 1988, but a population segment supporting the implementation of his extremist views (Jewish supremacy, total racial segregation, expulsion of the Arab population, and denial of their human and civil rights, including the right to life) has always existed in Israel. Not only did this ideology not fade away in the wake of the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre,¹¹⁴ the subsequent designation of Kach and Kahane Chai as terrorist organizations, and the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, but it has even been normalized and gained public legitimacy in recent years and its advocates regularly appear in news studios and hold seats in government and in the ruling coalition.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has played a central role in bringing Kahanism into the political mainstream. Following the establishment of the "government of change" (led by Naftali Bennett, and later rotating to Yair Lapid), which paused his continued premiership for a year and a half beginning in June 2021, and in order to ensure his return to power and political survival, Netanyahu chose to forge a political alliance with representatives of the Kahanist movement. A convergence of interests emerged between Netanyahu and Otzma Yehudit (the main party representing the Kahanist ideology in government, though not the sole one): while for Netanyahu the regime revolution has been intended to entrench his rule and obstruct the full pursuit of criminal proceedings against him, for the Kahanists it advances their racist values and reshapes reality accordingly. Prominent examples, detailed later on in this report, include efforts to remove the Arab public from the political arena as well as to seize control of the police in order to enable immunity for far-right activists and harsher selective enforcement, such as against the display of Palestinian flags.

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As for the domestic incentives leading to a competitive authoritarian regime in Israel, after a roughly three-year "blitz" of legislative proposals and other anti-democratic measures detailed below, it appears that Prime Minister Netanyahu still cannot or does not wish to finalize the transition to a fully authoritarian regime. In the current circumstances, he does not yet possess the power and control required to complete such a shift without provoking widespread internal unrest and attendant heavy public and economic costs, not to mention that he is already upholding his rule using competitive authoritarian tools. Accordingly, elections are still taking place, and opposition parties are not yet legally barred from participating and continue to operate openly in the Knesset and in the public and media arenas.¹¹⁵

114. Mass shooting at a mosque in Hebron in 1994, perpetrated by Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein, in which 29 Palestinians were killed and 125 others wounded.

115. Steven Levitsky, *"The New Authoritarianism"*, *The Atlantic* (10 Feb 2025).

The price that would be exacted by a shift to a fully authoritarian regime is tightly linked to the civil protest movement. A public protest launched in 2016 ("The Goren Square Protest"), initially directed at then-Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, urged the latter to open a criminal investigation against the prime minister over "The Submarine Affair," and subsequently demanded indictments in the three criminal cases against Netanyahu on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust and called for his resignation.

Beginning in May 2020, the government's conduct and its attempts to foment incitement and social polarization led to a broad public backlash and large-scale protests by citizens and civil society organizations ("The Balfour Protest"). As in the Goren Square protest, these emphasized personal rectitude and fighting corruption. Following Justice Minister Levin's proclamation of the regime revolution in January 2023, even broader segments of the public came to recognize that the dangers facing Israeli society were more severe than ever and extended into wider areas, requiring a struggle over the very existence of the democratic regime.

The desire to defend state institutions from the threat of capture by the government intensified the protest, which became the largest mass protest movement Israel had known up to that point. It peaked on "Gallant Night" in March 2023, in response to Netanyahu's decision to dismiss then-Defense Minister Yoav Gallant after he publicly warned of the security dangers posed by the "judicial overhaul."¹¹⁶

At the same time, sharp criticism of the regime revolution emerged from former senior officials in the State Attorney's Office, the civil service, the legal and defense establishments, former ministers and MKs, and prominent figures in the economy and academia. In an exceptional speech, then-Supreme Court President Esther Hayut stated that newly-appointed Justice Minister Levin's plan to reform the judiciary was "a relentless attack against the judicial system as if it was an enemy that should be defeated.... Those who drafted the plan cynically say it is meant to fix the judicial system. I say it is meant to crush it and to deal a fatal blow to the independence of the judicial branch and turn it into a silent branch.... The implication of this bad plan will be changing the democratic character of Israel beyond repair. This is not the way to go."¹¹⁷

A dramatic development also occurred in terms of the international incentives for shifting toward a competitive authoritarian regime. For years, the United States had justified to the American public its alliance with Israel and its status as the world's largest recipient of U.S. military aid partly on the basis of shared democratic values.¹¹⁸

Upon the election in November 2016 of Donald Trump, a populist with authoritarian tendencies, Prime Minister Netanyahu benefited from four years in which the White House was occupied by a president who showed no interest in the condition of democracy in Israel or elsewhere and who himself severely damaged the rule of law and democratic institutions in his own

116. Patrick Kingsley, "Israel Boils as Netanyahu Ousts Minister Who Bucked Court Overhaul," *The New York Times* (26 March 2023).

117. Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Judicial Overhaul Will Be 'Fatal Blow' to Israel's Democracy, Top Judge Says," *Axios* (12 Jan 2023).

118. Jeremy M. Sharp, "US Foreign Aid to Israel: Overview and Developments Since Oct 7, 2023," *Congressional Research Service* (8 May 2025).

country. As described in the report *Pseudo Democracy*, amid the criminal investigations and legal proceedings against him, Netanyahu led major authoritarian processes during Trump's first term (2016–2020).

When he was elected in November 2020, Joe Biden set himself the goal of strengthening democracy in the United States after the immense damage caused during Trump's presidency, as well as to bolster U.S. alliances with democratic countries worldwide. Although his administration convened a "Summit for Democracy" in December 2021, in practice the United States continued to act primarily on the basis of its interests, with strengthening the global democratic bloc constituting one interest among others rather than a dominant priority.¹¹⁹

Against the backdrop of the mass protests that erupted in Israel in early 2023, senior officials in the Biden administration pressured Netanyahu behind the scenes to halt the regime revolution.¹²⁰ When these efforts failed, the administration voiced its criticism in public. Noting his unhappiness over the judicial overhaul, President Biden said that Israel "cannot continue down this road" and pushed Netanyahu to find a compromise.¹²¹ Vice President Kamala Harris declared: "America will continue to stand for the values that have been the bedrock of the U.S.-Israel relationship, which includes continuing to strengthen our democracies, which as the (Israeli) ambassador has said, are both built on strong institutions, checks and balances, and I'll add: an independent judiciary."¹²² U.S. Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides asserted in an interview that "things are going off the rails."¹²³

Following the October 7 Hamas attack and the ensuing war, the Biden administration stopped addressing the democratic crisis in Israel, at least publicly. Nevertheless, Netanyahu and his coalition partners continued to advance the regime revolution concurrently with the war. Presumably, Trump's reelection in November 2024 will in the future be identified as a pivotal point in Israel's democratic decline, as it removed a major international "tether" on Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Indeed, on 20 March 2025, Netanyahu tweeted on his official X account: "In America and in Israel, when a strong right-wing leader wins an election, the leftist Deep State weaponizes the justice system to thwart the people's will. They won't win in either place! We stand strong together."¹²⁴

Presumably, Trump's reelection in November 2024 will in the future be identified as a pivotal point in Israel's democratic decline, as it removed a major international "tether" on Prime Minister Netanyahu

119. Thomas Carothers and Frances Brown, **Democracy Policy Under Biden: Confronting a Changed World*, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (6 Feb 2024).

120. Josef Federman, **Israeli PM, Biden Exchange Frosty Words Over Legal Overhaul*, *AP* (29 Mar 2023).

121. Josef Federman and Aamer Madhani, **Biden Warns Netanyahu About the Health of Israel's Democracy and Urges Compromise on Court Overhaul*, *AP* (21 Sep 2023).

122. Mike Wagenheim, *U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris Says Israel Needs 'independent Judiciary'*, *i24 News* (7 Jun 2023).

123. TOI Staff and Jacob Magid, **Nides: U.S. Working To Stop Israel From 'Going Off the Rails' With Judicial Overhaul*, *The Times of Israel* (10 Jul 2023).

124. Unattributed, **Netanyahu: 'Deep State' Using Justice System Against 'The People's Will'*, *i24 News* (20 Mar 2025).

For his part, President Trump called for canceling Netanyahu's trial, including in posts on his social media platform Truth Social, where he termed it a political "witch hunt" and even hinted that U.S. defense aid to Israel would cease if the trial were not stopped.¹²⁵ Subsequently, in a speech in the Knesset and in a formal letter, Trump appealed to Israeli President Yitzhak Herzog to grant Netanyahu a pardon.¹²⁶

Against the backdrop of the domestic and international incentives described above, Netanyahu's 37th government has undertaken cumulative steps, through both legislative initiatives and administrative decisions, that meet the criteria proposed by Levitsky, Way, and Ziblatt for the definition of a competitive authoritarian regime.

As will be detailed later in this chapter through concrete examples, although Israel's regime remains hybrid and retains democratic components, it can no longer be defined as a flawed democracy under commonly used categories (such as illiberal democracy, electoral democracy, or partially free democracy), because its authoritarian components have become too dominant and systematic.

Netanyahu and his government constantly attack state institutions and abuse them to gain a major advantage over their political rivals. Erosion of the ability to conduct fair elections, uphold unbiased game rules, and ensure broad protection of human and civil rights means that Israel has become a (partially) flawed authoritarian regime. The implications are far-reaching: the change in the character of the government directly affects its conduct, citizens' rights, and the chances of reversing in the direction of democracy.

The main strategy of competitive authoritarian regimes is to bombard the political arena with measures against democratic institutions, procedures, and game rules.¹²⁷ Even if these initiatives are not necessarily implemented in full, the very introduction of an anti-democratic administrative decision or legislative proposal to the public and the Knesset is of major importance to the government. Among other things, these bills and decisions are used in incitement campaigns and chip away at public trust in democratic institutions and "gatekeepers", thereby easing the adoption of concrete

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125. Yael Freidson, **Court Cancels Netanyahu's Cross-Examination This Week After Closed-Door Hearing With Mossad, IDF Intel Chiefs, Haaretz (29 Jun 2025).*

126. David Gritten and Sebastian Usher, **Trump Urges Israel's President To Pardon Benjamin Netanyahu, BBC (12 Nov 2025).*

127. Steven Levitsky, **The New Authoritarianism, The Atlantic (10 Feb 2025).*

steps with cumulative impact aimed at seizing control over them. At the same time, the government gradually accustoms the public to life under a non-democratic regime and erases its core values from public consciousness, replacing them with other laws and practices under the guise of the "will of the people."

The idea is thus conveyed to the public that in order for the government to realize the wishes of the majority it represents, it must overpower or eliminate the "gatekeepers" tasked with reviewing and scrutinizing its laws and decisions. This ignores the fact that the powers granted to these gatekeepers are intended to ensure fair elections and game rules, lawful and proper conduct of the state and its authorities, and the protection of human and civil rights.

In the following subsections, we will review the steps taken by Netanyahu's government to undermine democracy. We will address the abuse of democratic institutions from four perspectives: erosion of the ability to hold fair elections, abuse of access to resources, seizure of the judiciary and law enforcement authorities, and capture of the media. Examples will be provided for each aspect to illustrate the change in the rules of the game, in line with the characteristics of a competitive authoritarian regime.

Erosion of Ability to Conduct Fair Elections

On the one hand, elections in Israel still take place formally: they are competitive, opposition parties can conduct public campaigns, and there is no massive fraud. On the other hand, Prime Minister Netanyahu is advancing conditions designed to make it harder to hold fair elections. Based on past experience, there is real concern that this trend will intensify.

Weakening of Judiciary and Gatekeepers

The regime revolution targeting the judiciary and the gatekeepers is particularly relevant in this context. The politicization of the Supreme Court carried out by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Justice Minister Levin, through a campaign of delegitimization and legislative amendments, has severe consequences for the ability to conduct fair elections in Israel. Amendment No. 4 to the Courts Law of March 2025 allows for the politicization of both the Judicial Selection Committee and the process of appointing Supreme Court justices,¹²⁸ thus undermining the judicial independence of the Supreme Court, which is essential for effective oversight of free and fair elections and for protecting the right to vote and to be elected.

The politicization of the Supreme Court carried out by Prime Minister Netanyahu and Justice Minister Levin, through a campaign of delegitimization and legislative amendments, has severe consequences for the ability to conduct fair elections in Israel

The reason is that the Supreme Court, among its other responsibilities, plays a key role in overseeing the disqualification of party lists and candidates running in Knesset elections. It

128. Eitay Mack, **Levin-Sa'ar Plan*: Political Takeover of the Judicial System*, *Zulat* (19 Mar 2025); *Basic Law: The Judiciary (Amendment No. 4)*, *Knesset National Legislation Repository* (26 Mar 2025).

protects equality of opportunity among electoral competitors by enforcing the "rules of the game," ensuring that advantages or restrictions (in such areas as party financing or election campaigning) do not unfairly benefit lists already in positions of power. Moreover, Supreme Court rulings basically restrict a caretaker government's leeway during election periods, particularly with respect to budgetary matters, to prevent conflicts of interest or improper political considerations in the lead-up to elections. These rulings are crucial for preventing the abuse of governmental power and public resources to influence electoral outcomes. Without such safeguards, elections cannot truly be considered free and fair.

In addition, the current Netanyahu government's campaign of delegitimization and incitement against Supreme Court justices has undermined public trust in the electoral process, given that a Supreme Court justice (the most senior member after the court's president) serves as chair of the Central Elections Committee (CEC), and that the president of the Supreme Court appoints the chairs of regional election committees.¹²⁹

Delegitimization of Political Participation of Arab Citizens and Opposition

No less severe in their implications are the campaigns to delegitimize opposition parties and their leaders, as well as the participation of the Arab minority in the "political game." The government has even submitted bills designed to facilitate the disqualification of candidates from opposition parties, particularly those representing the Arab public.

Among other things, in response to former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's registration of a new party ahead of the 2026 elections, coalition MKs announced their intention to introduce a bill that would bar anyone who previously headed a party and left it with outstanding debts from receiving public funding to establish a new party. The MKs explicitly stated that the proposal was intended to prevent Bennett, who was leading in some polls, from running in the elections.¹³⁰

Another example is the smear campaign against Yair Golan, leader of the Democrats party and a retired IDF general. Aimed at hindering the formation of an alternative coalition after the next elections, a conspiracy theory was circulated whereby Golan was involved in planning the October 7 Hamas attack, incited the public to rebellion and refusal to serve in the army, and defamed Israel abroad. In addition, the Ministerial Committee for Legislation approved a private bill to revoke ranks and privileges from senior IDF officers who called for refusal to serve in the army or defamed the security forces, a measure intended to harm Golan and other former military officers seeking to run for election on behalf of opposition parties.¹³¹

The attempts to outlaw Arab parties and measures designed to deter Arab voters from going to the polls are also linked to the government's efforts to reduce the chances of a new coalition emerging after the elections.

Arab citizens constitute 20% of Israel's population and tend to vote mostly for Arab parties (84% did so in the last elections in November 2022), with the remainder voting mainly for Zionist

129. [Knesset Elections Law\] Combined Version1969-\[, Nevo](#) (last updated 14 Aug 2024).

130. Gabriel Colodro, [*Proposed Israeli Law Could Derail Bennett's Political Comeback, The Media Line](#) (6 Oct 2025).

131. Sam Sokol, [*Yair Golan Shrugs Off 'Petty' Coalition-Backed Bill To Strip Him of Rank, The Times of Israel](#) (7 Jul 2025).

parties that are not part of Netanyahu's far-right coalition.¹³² Removing them from the political arena would lower overall voter turnout and pave the way for parties whose support has declined, such as Religious Zionism, to enter the Knesset. Even if they are not excluded, the very promotion of such proposals is an integral part of the delegitimization campaign against forming a coalition with Arab parties, or a coalition supported by those parties from outside.

To avoid enacting apartheid laws that would explicitly prohibit non-Jews from participating in national and local elections (a move that would presumably exact a heavy toll on Israel's foreign relations), the Netanyahu government adopted a variety of sophisticated measures. For example, it advanced in the Knesset a bill to expand the grounds stipulated in Basic Law: The Knesset¹³³ for barring participation in elections, as well as bills to restrict the right to be elected and to exclude council members and deputies in local authorities.¹³⁴ These bills, which normalize the shrinking of the democratic space via a simultaneous attack on the national and local levels, are intended to complement other efforts to bar the Arab minority from the "political arena" by creating the cognitive infrastructure for political and racist persecution and for nationalist and inciteful "counterterrorism" campaigns. Their enactment would also lead to the exclusion from the local and national political arenas of Arab candidates, independents, or members of opposition groups via the legitimization of sham disqualification and impeachment procedures that involve defamation, humiliation, and false accusations, without any minimal factual or legal basis.

For example, Netanyahu's coalition exploited the war in Gaza to try to impeach MK Ofer Cassif of Hadash for signing a political petition to the International Court of Justice in The Hague¹³⁵ and Hadash leader MK Ayman Odeh for remarks he posted on the X platform.¹³⁶ In both cases, these were sham proceedings lacking any factual or legal basis and in defiance of Supreme Court rulings. It was known in advance that there would be no Knesset majority to approve the impeachments (as indeed proved to be the case) and that even had a majority been secured, the decisions would almost certainly have been overturned by the Supreme Court. In practice, the proceedings served mainly as a tool for wild incitement against the Arab minority and its representatives in the Knesset.

Over 2,200 complaints were filed with the Knesset Ethics Committee against MK Aida Touma-Sliman of Hadash in November 2023, after she posted a tweet stating: "From testimonies at Gaza's Shifa Hospital: operating rooms

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132. Eitay Mack, **Implementation of Rabbi Kahane's Ideology: Bar Arab Candidates and Skew Elections*, *Zulat* (11 Nov 2024).

133. *Ibid.*

134. Eitay Mack, **Law on Local Authority Elections: Racist Onslaught on Democracy*, *Zulat* (12 Dec 2024).

135. Eitay Mack, *Improper, Baseless, and Unnecessary Impeachment Proceedings Against MK Ofer Cassif*, *Zulat* (29 Jan 2024).

136. Noa Shpigel and Adi Hashmonai, **Knesset Advances Ousting of Israeli Arab MK Ayman Odeh Over Social Media Post*, *Haaretz* (30 Jun 2025).

bombed, smell of phosphorus in the air. Out of 48 surgeons, only 7 remain. Live fire at displaced people in humanitarian corridors, and still people here insist that 'the most moral army in the world' does not harm civilians and does not attack hospitals."¹³⁷ The committee decided to suspend her from the Knesset for two months and to withhold her salary for two weeks. The decision stated: "The committee believes that for a Member of Knesset to accuse the IDF of a war crime contributes to the efforts of the State of Israel's enemies to undermine the legitimacy of the State of Israel, whether intentionally or not.... The committee regrets that MK Touma-Sliman chose to stick to her position and did not retract her words, apologize or qualify them, even after the official statement issued by the IDF Spokesperson's Unit."¹³⁸

It should be noted that Netanyahu had already attempted to undermine the political participation of Arab citizens in previous tenures, such as by placing cameras in polling stations in order to lower voter turnout in Arab locales, raising the electoral threshold in 2014 to impede Arab parties from getting into the Knesset, intensifying efforts to disqualify Arab parties and candidates by amending Basic Law: The Knesset, and the "Impeachment Law"¹³⁹ enacted in 2016 that allows for the termination of an MK's tenure on the same grounds as for disqualification of a candidate running for election.

As part of the efforts to thwart pragmatic political cooperation between Jewish and Arab MKs, previous election campaigns featured particularly harsh and inflammatory messaging by the Likud party labeling any such cooperation as illegitimate and as support for terrorism. Ahead of the elections to the 25th Knesset in November 2022, Netanyahu posted on the X platform that Ra'am was "an antisemitic, anti-Zionist, terror-supporting party representing the Muslim Brotherhood that seeks to destroy Israel."¹⁴⁰ His tweet thus effectively marked the 32% of Arab citizens who voted for Ra'am as terror supporters with whom cooperation is forbidden.

This also represented an escalation from earlier incendiary campaigns against Arab candidates and parties, such as Netanyahu's 2015 video proclaiming that "the Arabs are voting in droves,"¹⁴¹ or the 2019 campaign slogan "It's Either Bibi or Tibi."¹⁴² In November 2025, he issued a media statement announcing that he intended to "complete the process" of banning the Muslim Brotherhood organization in Israel, thereby hinting that he would outlaw Ra'am, which is considered the movement's southern branch.¹⁴³ Following the

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137. Hezki Baruch, *Over 2,200 Complaints Against MK Touma-Sliman*, *Arutz 7* (13 Nov 2023).

138. Unattributed, **Ethics Committee Decides To Impose Sanctions on MKs Khatib Yassin and Touma-Sliman for Their Recent Statements*, *Knesset News* (16 Nov 2023).

139. Amir Fuchs and Avital Friedman, **What Is the 'MK Expulsion Law?'*, *Israel Democracy Institute* (14 Jul 2025).

140. Benjamin Netanyahu, *post on X* (26 Jun 2022).

141. Jonathan Lis, **Netanyahu 'Sorry' His Comments Offended Israeli Arabs*, *Haaretz* (23 Mar 2015).

142. Unattributed, **Israel-Arab MK Tibi Slams Likud Slogan, Accuses Netanyahu of Incitement*, *Middle East Monitor* (4 Mar 2019).

143. Jonathan Lis, **Netanyahu Vows To Outlaw Muslim Brotherhood in Israel*, *Haaretz* (24 Nov 2025).

statement, Ra'am leader MK Mansour Abbas announced that the party would separate from the Shura Council.¹⁴⁴ However, it is clear that regardless of what step Ra'am takes, it will be accused by the government of supporting terrorism.

In this context, Minister Ben-Gvir posted already in December 2023 that "Abbas = Terror Supporter,"¹⁴⁵ and that "Abbas and the Muslim Brotherhood party are distinct terror supporters. The prevailing mindset has collapsed and the conclusion is clear: zero tolerance for terror supporters in Israel's Knesset. A self-preserving country must remove the Ra'am party from the Knesset and outlaw it."¹⁴⁶

Incitement and Disinformation

Another tool adopted by Netanyahu and his close associates to undermine the fairness of elections is extensive use of fake news and disinformation disseminated on social media, mainstream media outlets, and loyal journalists, in order to dominate the narrative and set the public agenda through the information presented to the public. The integrated use of all these channels to spread government messages and incendiary content has come to be known as "the poison machine."

For example, in previous election campaigns, social media was flooded with fake news from "anonymous" sources. In the 2020 elections, the Likud party used an application that enabled the collection of voters' personal data for targeted inflammatory political propaganda (for example, a post by a bot stating that "a left-wing government supported by Arabs who want to destroy us all - men, women, and children - must not be allowed to arise").¹⁴⁷ Ahead of the March 2021 elections, a campaign on social media circulated false claims that the CEC was involved in a conspiracy to falsify election results in order to transfer Knesset seats from Netanyahu's right-wing bloc to the "Anyone But Bibi" camp.¹⁴⁸

Ahead of the November 2022 elections, Likud launched a social media campaign intended to delegitimize the CEC, its integrity and professionalism. Part of the campaign, which directly harmed the democratic infrastructure, was waged through anonymous social media accounts, while Netanyahu himself stated that the CEC "is trying to bring down the right-wing government even before the election." The situation escalated to the point that the chairman of the CEC, Supreme Court Justice Yitzhak Amit, had to tell the Likud representative: "I hope that what we are seeing from you is not, God forbid, the beginning of a planned delegitimization of the election results. You complain of a lack of public confidence in the election process, but your emissaries are taking part in creating the feeling of distrust."¹⁴⁹

The modus operandi of the "poison machine" run by Netanyahu and his close circle was exposed in a report featured on Channel 12's investigative program *Uvda*, which showed how Netanyahu's

144. TOI Staff, *Ra'am Leader Says Party Will Cut Ties With Religious Council, Become 'Completely Civic', *The Times of Israel* (7 Dec 2025).

145. Itamar Ben-Gvir, [post on X](#) (2 Dec 2023).

146. Itamar Ben-Gvir, [post on Facebook](#) (2 Dec 2023).

147. Michal Evron Yaniv, *Fake News & the Violation of Human Rights: Challenges & Responses, *Zulat* (23 Dec 2021).

148. Omer Kabir, [Learned From Trump: How Likud and Its Supporters Running Campaign To Undermine Electoral Integrity](#), *Calcalist* (22 March 2021).

149. Omer Benjakob, *Israel Election: Authorities Brace for Interference - From Foreign and Domestic Actors, *Haaretz* (31 Oct 2022).

bureau chief incited against political rivals, anti-government protesters, and even against a bereaved family.¹⁵⁰ Research conducted by the newspaper *TheMarker* also revealed how the "poison machine" selects its targets and coordinates attacks against them, particularly against the Hostages and Missing Families Forum,¹⁵¹ former Hamas captives who dared to criticize Netanyahu,¹⁵² and the Brothers in Arms movement (which played a central role in the protests against the regime revolution and, after the October 7 attack, provided assistance to affected civilians).¹⁵³

Given that the next elections are likely to center on Prime Minister Netanyahu's fitness to continue in office in light of his personal responsibility for the massacre of October 7 and his efforts to shift this responsibility onto others, it is reasonable to assume that the "poison machine" will intensify its attacks, using a range of tools that have been tested and refined by the 37th government in recent years. As demonstrated thus far, the damage sustained by Israel's democratic fabric is severe.

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Abuse of Access to Resources

In addition to legislation and delegitimization campaigns undermining the ability of political rivals to compete fairly in elections, the competitive authoritarian regime model proposed by Levitsky and his colleagues also points to the extensive exploitation of state institutions for partisan purposes and the systematic privileging of members of the ruling party over those of the opposition. They argue that the fairness of the game rules is eroded when the government hijacks the access to resources, the media, and law-enforcement authorities.¹⁵⁴

Public Funds and Corruption Used to Entrench Power

Widespread corruption is a common phenomenon in competitive authoritarian regimes. Hungary, for example, was ranked the most corrupt country in the European Union in 2023.¹⁵⁵ One of the defining features of Orbán's rule is its success in tying the future of the political, economic, and security elites to its own survival and stability, thereby weakening the prospects for the emergence of alternatives to the regime.¹⁵⁶

150. Sefi Ovadia and Eyal Gonen, *Uvda Expose: This Is How Balfour Residence's War Room Works*, *N12* (19 Dec 2024).

151. Refaella Goichman, 'You Call This Families? Filthy Traitorous Anarchists': Poison Machine Marks New Target - Hostages' Families, *TheMarker* (12 Feb 2024).

152. Itamar Mainemer, 'Send Her Back to Gaza': Synchronized Hate Campaign Against Captivity Survivors, *N12* (18 May 2025).

153. Refaella Goichman and Eytan Avriel, *Inside the Poison Machine: How Most Effective Propaganda Apparatus Ever Seen in Israel Operates*, *TheMarker* (7 Jan 2024).

154. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War', *Cambridge University Press* (2010); Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy*, 13:2 (2002), pp. 51-65.

155. 'CPI 2023: Highlights and Insights', *Transparency International* (30 Jan 2024).

156. Eitay Mack, *The Corruption Revolution*, *The Seventh Eye* (5 Feb 2023).

In Israel, Netanyahu and his government exploit state institutions to generate and preserve resource gaps that hinder the opposition's ability to compete.¹⁵⁷ This is done through extraordinarily voluminous use (relative to other Israeli governments) of coalition funds, sectoral financing,¹⁵⁸ and political appointments, creating dependence of entire parties and population groups on Netanyahu's continued tenure.¹⁵⁹ Thus, whereas in 2021-2022 coalition funds amounted to 700 million shekels per year, under the current government they totaled approximately 5.8 billion shekels for 2023, some 7.9 billion shekels for 2024,¹⁶⁰ and about 5 billion shekels for 2025.¹⁶¹

Members of the 37th government have also been linked to various corruption scandals. According to a report featured on Channel 13's investigative program Hamakor, Minister Miri Regev and the Transportation Ministry's top management ranked local authorities using a color-coded scheme (labeled "the traffic light system") based on political partiality and votes cast in Likud's primaries, in which favored local authority heads were dubbed "diamonds." According to the report, projects were funded and executed contrary to the recommendations of the professional echelon, and in cases where the latter suggested projects in cities that did not rank high on the scheme, Regev ignored the advice.¹⁶² Following the report, the Israel Police's National Fraud Unit launched an investigation into suspected fraud and breach of trust at the Transportation Ministry which, after lengthy delays, concluded with a recommendation not to pursue indictments despite the documentary evidence.¹⁶³

Yet another criminal investigation was opened against Social Equality and Women's Advancement Minister May Golan and her associates, on suspicion of creating fictitious jobs for cronies, exploiting parliamentary aides, using funds for unclear purposes, and accepting bribes.¹⁶⁴ Energy Minister Eli Cohen was investigated on suspicion that during his tenure as foreign minister in 2023 he ordered diplomatic passports issued to influential Likud members and to the prime minister's son Yair Netanyahu.¹⁶⁵ National Security Council chief Tzachi Hanegbi

In Israel, Netanyahu and his government exploit state institutions to generate and preserve resource gaps that hinder the opposition's ability to compete. This is done through extraordinarily voluminous use (relative to other Israeli governments) of coalition funds, sectoral financing, and political appointments, creating dependence of entire parties and population groups on Netanyahu's continued tenure

157. **Pseudo Democracy: State of the Regime in Israel* (see footnote 4) described how Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and the Mapai party likewise made political use of resource allocation.

158. Oren Dori, **Knesset Approves 2025 State Budget*, *Globes* (25 Mar 2025).

159. Eitay Mack, **Abolition of the Board of Directors in Government Companies: Corruption & Damage to Equality*, *Zulat* (31 May 2023).

160. Yuval Einhorn, **What Is the Budget Dispute About?*, *Globes* (30 Nov 2023).

161. Gad Lior, **Government Approves 5 Billion Shekels in Coalition Funds for 2025 Budget*, *Ynetnews* (4 Mar 2025).

162. Raviv Drucker, *Hamakor, Season 23, Episode 10: Miri Regev's Secrets, Part I*, *Reshet 13* (24 May 2024).

163. Nitsan Shafir, **Police Probe Alleged Political Favors at Transport Ministry*, *Globes* (10 Jun 2024).

164. Yosi Mizrahi and Dafna Liel, *The Inspector: What Does Minister May Golan Do With Our Money? Watch Expose Leading to Launch of Criminal Investigation*, *N12* (5 Jan 2025); Branu Tegene, *Exclusive: May Golan's Investigation Will Also Include Suspicion of Accepting Bribes Under Aggravated Circumstances*, *N12* (19 Sep 2025).

165. Yuval Barnea, **Amid War, Israel's FM Hands Diplomatic Passport to Netanyahu's Son*, *The Jerusalem Post* (9 Dec 2023).

is suspected of accepting bribes from businesspeople to promote a project to build an airport in the Jerusalem area financed by a foreign government.¹⁶⁶

At the same time, the Netanyahu government has taken steps to weaken or replace gatekeepers in government ministries and public authorities. Its aggressive moves against these officials enable the concurrent entrenchment of an authoritarian regime and the expansion of corruption, as the two processes are closely intertwined.¹⁶⁷

One of the Netanyahu government's main methods for installing loyalists while bypassing gatekeepers has been to expand and normalize temporary civil service appointments - a tactic that allows jobs to go to cronies lacking the qualifications required for permanent positions (even when suitably qualified, these loyalists have an incentive to curry favor with their recruiters in order to secure a permanent post). Candidates with clear political affiliations are placed in temporary capacities to pave the way for permanent positions later, ignoring basic qualification requirements and professional assessments of their suitability at the time.¹⁶⁸ Such appointments harm the functioning of and public trust in the professional echelon and increase public corruption, as these loyalists facilitate politically motivated and unequal allocation of state resources.

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Subordination of Legal Counsels in Government Ministries to Political Echelon

The Netanyahu government has overtaken the legal counsels in government ministries amid a campaign of incitement and disinformation and promotion of several legislative proposals aimed at abolishing their independence and turning their role into political positions of trust where their legal opinions would no longer be binding. One of these bills has been approved in a preliminary reading,¹⁶⁹ but even if they ultimately do not get passed by the Knesset, their very advancement and the attendant campaign have already undermined the status and public trust in these legal advisers.¹⁷⁰

These bills do not merely signify a reduction in their status, but effectively eliminate the role of ministerial legal advisers as gatekeepers empowered to prevent government ministers from taking actions that violate the law or court rulings, or that are inconsistent with proper

166. TOI Staff, **Police, Finding Proof of Wrongdoing, Pass Tzachi Hanegbi Bribery File to Prosecutors*, *The Times of Israel* (10 Jun 2025).

167. Eitay Mack, **From Gatekeepers to Guardians of Authoritarian Regime and Corruption*, *Zulat* (20 Sep 2023).

168. Eitay Mack, **Government Harms Professionalism of Civil Service With Temporary Appointments to Senior Positions*, *Zulat* (15 Feb 2024).

169. *Bill on Independence of Legal Counsels in Government Ministries :Status and Powers2025-*, *Knesset National Legislation Repository* (5 May 2025); Ariela Karmel and TOI Staff, *Knesset Gives Initial OK to Bill Ending AG's Authority Over Ministry Legal Advisers*, *The Times of Israel* (7 Jan 2026).

170. Eitay Mack, **Abolishing Independence of Legal Counsels: Impairment of Gatekeepers*, *Zulat* (29 Aug 2023); Nili Aleksandrowicz and Eitay Mack, **Law To Neutralize Legal Counsels in Government Ministries: Seeks Subordination to the Political Echelon*, *Zulat* (20 Jul 2025).

administration. Since ministers would be empowered to interpret the law and legal positions themselves, they would be able to justify violations on the grounds that they are the sole competent authority to interpret the law, and that according to their interpretation they are complying with it. For example, the offense of breach of trust would effectively lose its meaning, as ministers would be authorized to define the boundaries of what is permitted and what is not. In practice, the proposed law would confer "legality" on corruption, conflicts of interest, and improper running of the government and ministries.

In this context, it should be noted that the role of a legal counsel is not limited to personally advise the ministry's top echelon about reforms and matters of direct interest to the minister, but also to manage the legal department staff, provide guidance on legality and proper administration across the full scope of the ministry's routine work, including promotions and hiring of staff, projects, affiliate bodies and companies, contracts and transactions, funding of external entities, and legal proceedings. Should one of the bills to neutralize legal counsels be approved, the minister would be empowered to "legalize" corrupt contracts and tenders, hiring of cronies or unqualified individuals, or other actions that would personally benefit the minister and associates.

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Politicization of Civil Service

The Netanyahu government is politicizing the civil service, which employs nearly 80,000 people.¹⁷¹ In 2018, Netanyahu appointed Daniel Hershkowitz, former chair of the Jewish Home party, as Civil Service Commissioner, a position he held for six years. Netanyahu's efforts to nominate Attorney Roi Kahlon as his successor met with opposition from the Attorney General, who wrote that there was a legal impediment to his appointment because "Attorney Kahlon's professional experience and personal credentials do not even come close to qualifying him for the senior post of Civil Service Commissioner in general, or in a temporary capacity in particular.... There are significant and substantive gaps between the way his professional experience and personal qualifications were presented and reality."¹⁷² After Kahlon's term as acting commissioner ended (under a compromise arrangement reached with the Supreme Court), Netanyahu reinstated Hershkowitz, this time as acting commissioner.¹⁷³

It should be emphasized that as part of his duties, the commissioner holds the authority to enforce the Civil Service Regulations governing disciplinary offenses, prohibitions, and obligations. In addition, he plays a significant role in appointments, promotions, suspensions,

171. Netanel Gamss, [Shocking Figure: One Fourth of Government Ministry Workers Employed on Personal Contracts](#), *TheMarker* (2 May 2024).

172. Netanel Gamss, [Shocking Figure: One Fourth of Government Ministry Workers Employed on Personal Contracts](#), *TheMarker* (2 May 2024).

173. Zvi Zerachia, [After Refusing To Extend His Tenure Netanyahu Seeks To Reappoint Hershkowitz as Civil Service Commissioner](#), *Calcalist* (8 Jun 2025).

dismissals, and disciplinary proceedings. In other words, he is the Civil Service's investigator, prosecutor, judge, and enforcer all at once. For her part, the Attorney General stressed the need to create a placement committee "in light of the unique characteristics of the position, the commissioner's duty to act in a nonpartisan and independent manner, and his profound influence on the public service."¹⁷⁴

In response to petitions, the Supreme Court ruled that the appointment process must be competitive and overturned the government decision that allowed Netanyahu to appoint a commissioner of his choosing.¹⁷⁵ Chief Justice Yitzhak Amit wrote that the correct question "is not why the Prime Minister should not be allowed to appoint a person of his choosing to such a senior position," but rather "why he should be allowed to do so, given that this is an apolitical position, that there is concern over the politicization of the public service, and that the outcome of a competitive process is preferable.... Current norms are not the norms of 2011. In the past, political appointments were made on the sly and kept on a 'low profile,' but today there is not even an attempt to conceal the intention to nominate political loyalists, and as much is openly declared by government officials.... Indeed, the respondents' arguments amount to a declaration of intent to make political appointments in the public service, which raises concern that the government's decision to set up an appointments committee (and an advisory committee before that) is intended to facilitate the process. This only underscores the importance of the next commissioner as a gatekeeper."¹⁷⁶

Such conduct is not unique to Israel. In Venezuela under President Hugo Chávez, for example, the civil service became not only a tool for implementing his policies for the poor, fostering corruption, and exploiting state resources, but also a resource in its own right: an inexhaustible reservoir of jobs. The consequences of the decline in Venezuela's governance are plain to see, and signal the very real dangers of pursuing Netanyahu and his associates' current policy. The hijacking of the civil service by Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro was executed through a combination of three main tactics: repression and dismissals, evasion and neglect, and militarization.¹⁷⁷ Civil servants, whether they were genuine supporters of the regime's policies or opponents, were forced to become enthusiastic Chavistas, or at least appear as such, in order to keep their jobs and livelihoods.

The Netanyahu government has also advanced the politicization of the Government Companies Authority (GCA), which would turn state-owned enterprises into a

The Netanyahu government has also advanced the politicization of the Government Companies Authority (GCA), which would turn state-owned enterprises into a kind of "petty cash" of the Likud party to be used for dishing out budgets and jobs to cronies, activists, and political supporters

174. Tova Zimuki and Itamar Eichner, *Attorney General in Scathing Letter: Prime Minister Alone Cannot Appoint Next Civil Service Commissioner*, *Ynet* (19 Jun 2024).

175. Supreme Court Case HCl 37830-08-24 Louis Brandeis Institute for Society ,Economy ,and Democracy v .Israel Government, *Nevo* (12 May 2025).

176. Eitay Mack, *What's the Connection Between Supreme Court Justice Noam Sohlberg and Burmese Fitness Instructor Khing Hnin Wai?*, *The Seventh Eye* (25 May 2025).

177. Eitay Mack, *Battle for Appointment of Civil Service Commissioner: A Watershed Moment*, *The Seventh Eye* (13 Aug 2024).

kind of "petty cash" of the Likud party to be used for dishing out budgets and jobs to cronies, activists, and political supporters.

Israel has 71 state-owned enterprises with assets valued at more than 235 billion shekels. These include major corporations that provide essential services to the public and feature prominently in many sectors of the economy and in the daily lives of citizens, in such areas as energy, education, water, health, housing, seaports, transportation infrastructure, security, and culture. Attorney Michal Rosenboim, director of the GCA, resigned her position due to the pressures she faced and went on to publicly reveal their nature.¹⁷⁸ A bill known as the "Jobs Law," which would allow ministers to appoint members of their own parties as directors of government-owned companies, was recently approved in a preliminary reading.¹⁷⁹

Takeover of Judiciary and Law Enforcement Authorities

All competitive authoritarian regimes are characterized by politicization and pressures on officeholders in the judiciary and other law enforcement bodies to induce them to act in a politically biased manner. This enables a government to carry out unlawful actions with impunity and ensures that legal disputes are resolved in favor of the prime minister heading it.

Numerous examples can be found worldwide of measures that undermine the principle of fairness within law enforcement authorities in regimes with authoritarian characteristics. For example, in July 2012 Tunisia's President Kais Saied announced that as part of the "war on corruption" he would abolish the Supreme Judicial Council, whose role had been to oversee the judiciary, safeguard its independence, and address complaints against judges and prosecutors. A decade later, he issued a decree

replacing it with a political council, 9 of whose 21 members were appointed directly by him, as well as giving himself the authority to intervene in the appointment, dismissal, and promotion of judges. Due to the refusal of some judges to take part in the persecution of his political rivals and critics, President Saied issued an additional decree empowering himself to sack judges and prosecutors. Accordingly, he proceeded to immediately fire 57 of them on the grounds that they were "corrupt." The court ordered 49 of them reinstated, but Saied refused to comply with the ruling.¹⁸⁰

Weakening and Politicization of Judiciary

As noted above, in March 2025 the Knesset approved a law altering the composition of the Judicial Selection Committee and its appointment mechanism.¹⁸¹ This followed Justice Minister Levin's announcement, immediately upon the formation of the government, of his intention to

178. Sam Sokol and TOI Staff, **Top Government Official Quits, Says Minister Seeks To Use Office To 'Accumulate Power'*, *The Times of Israel* (30 Dec 2023).

179. Noa Shpigel, **Knesset Advances Netanyahu Coalition Legislative Blitz Weakening Judiciary, Forcing Judaism Into Public Sphere*, *Haaretz* (17 Dec 2025).

180. Eitay Mack, *Netanyahu Government's Shenanigans Smokescreen for Dramatic Moves*, *The Seventh Eye* (2 Dec 2024).

181. Unattributed, *Change of Composition of Judicial Selection Committee Gets Final Approval*, *Knesset News* (27 March 2025); *Basic Law: The Judiciary (Amendment No. 4)*, *Knesset National Legislation Repository* (26 Mar 2025).

promote such legislation as part of the "judicial reform" he declared in January 2023.¹⁸² However, widespread public protests impeded the advancement of this legislation.

This law harms the fundamental principles of the rule of law and judicial autonomy¹⁸³ because it creates dependence of the individual judge, and of the judiciary as a whole, on the political echelon with regard to appointments and promotions. Judges seeking promotion will know in advance that they must present a "portfolio" of decisions and rulings that appeal to politicians from both coalition and opposition. Instead of deciding a case on the basis of the law and the factual record before them, this political dependence might, consciously or unconsciously, cast a dangerous influence. Even if they do not allow such political dependence to affect their judgment, public trust will be seriously impacted since judges will forever be suspected of acting accordingly. For its part, the government will be able to appoint judges who are expected in advance to rule leniently in specific criminal and civil proceedings (either ongoing or future ones) against politicians from the parties that endorsed them, or to nominate judges known not to oppose the appointment to public office of corrupt individuals associated with those parties.

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Another law approved by the Netanyahu government in January 2025 grants the Minister of Justice the authority to determine the amount of membership fees of the Israel Bar Association (IBA).¹⁸⁴ This law undermines the IBA's independence and its ability to function as an autonomous professional body that upholds the rule of law, human rights, and Israel's core values. Triggered by the IBA's prominent role in opposing anti-democratic and corrupt legislative proposals in Knesset debates, before the Supreme Court, in the media, and in mass street protests, the law was part of the government's effort to pressure the IBA into supporting government-backed candidates on the committees selecting civil and rabbinical judges.¹⁸⁵ Because of the IBA's stance against the regime revolution, the government also attempted to thwart Attorney Amit Becher's victory in the elections for the presidency of the IBA.¹⁸⁶ In response to a petition, the Supreme Court subsequently issued interim injunctions suspending the law's entry into force until further notice.¹⁸⁷

Immediately upon taking office, Trump's second administration (which, as noted above, is viewed as a role model by members of the current coalition) also targeted bar associations,

182. Yael Freidson and Noa Shpigel, *Netanyahu's Justice Minister Presents Plans for Radical Judicial Overhaul*, *Haaretz* (4 Jan 2023).

183. Sarah Ben-Nun, *Israel's AG Calls To Strike Down 'Severely Harmful' Government Reform of Judicial Selection*, *The Jerusalem Post* (1 Dec 2025).

184. Unattributed, *Approved in Final Readings: Membership Dues for Israel Bar Association To Be Lowered; Association's Use of Dues To Be Limited to Implementation of Its Core Functions and Mandatory Activities*, *Knesset News* (26 Jan 2025).

185. Eitay Mack, *Government Advances Takeover of Israel Bar Association Through Budget Control*, *Zulat* (4 Nov 2024).

186. Michael Starr, *Judicial Reform Opponent May Win Israel Bar Race With Record Turnout*, *The Jerusalem Post* (21 Jun 2023).

187. Netael Bandel, *High Court Issues Conditional Order on Bill To Control Israel Bar Association Budget*, *Ynetnews* (13 Nov 2025).

lawyers, and law schools in the United States seen as representing antagonistic views in a bid to intimidate them. A \$3.2-million grant to the American Bar Association was canceled¹⁸⁸ and funding for lawyer training programs and other federal grants was cut by the Attorney General as part of President Trump and his administration's campaign against perceived rivals.¹⁸⁹

In March 2025, the Netanyahu government also gained the Knesset's approval for a law stipulating that the Judiciary Ombudsman is to be appointed by a committee chaired by the Minister of Justice.¹⁹⁰ The selection of a Judiciary Ombudsman of its own choosing smacks of conflict of interest, as it enables the government to intimidate judges, indirectly disrupt judicial proceedings, and undermine the right to a fair trial through abuse of the extensive powers the law grants to this officeholder as it is.¹⁹¹

Even if the current choice of retired judge Asher Kula could be considered proper, there is no guarantee that the next appointment under this law will be so. Moreover, the fact that in defiance of a Supreme Court ruling Justice Minister Levin insisted on appointing Kula as the supervising judge in the investigation of the Military Advocate General (charged with leaking the Sde Teiman video showing Israeli soldiers abusing a Palestinian detainee at a military detention facility in 2024) may indicate that he regards him as an appointee who will toe the government's line.¹⁹²

In addition, in July 2023 the government passed a law limiting judicial review based on the reasonableness standard, but it was subsequently overturned by the Supreme Court with a majority of 8 of its 15 justices.¹⁹³ Since the beginning of the revolution, the Netanyahu government has also advanced legislation to restrict the right of standing and judicial review of Basic Laws and of ordinary legislation.

Alongside the promotion of bills aimed at politicizing the judiciary, Levin has delayed judicial appointments to all levels of the courts, severely harming the justice system's ability to fulfill its functions,¹⁹⁴ particularly with respect to judges who were labeled insufficiently patriotic in right-wing campaigns.¹⁹⁵

Alongside the promotion of bills aimed at politicizing the judiciary, Levin has delayed judicial appointments to all levels of the courts, severely harming the justice system's ability to fulfill its functions, particularly with respect to judges who were labeled insufficiently patriotic in right-wing campaigns

188. Karen Sloan, *American Bar Association Sues U.S. Justice Department, Claiming Retaliation Over Grants*, *Reuters* (24 Apr 2025).

189. Tom Dreisbach, *Trump Has Used Government Powers To Target More Than 100 Perceived Enemies*, *NPR* (28 Apr 2025).

190. Unattributed, *Change of Method for Selecting Judiciary Ombudsman Gets Final Approval*, *Knesset News* (4 Mar 2025).

191. Eitay Mack, *Political Appointment of Judiciary Ombudsman Harms Independence of Courts*, *Zulaf* (1 Oct 2024).

192. Sarah Ben-Nun, *High Court Rejects Levin Bid To Revive Kula Appointment for Sde Teiman Probe Supervision*, *The Jerusalem Post* (23 Dec 2025).

193. Jeremy Sharon, *In Historic Ruling, High Court Strikes Down Key Judicial Overhaul Legislation*, *The Times of Israel* (1 Jan 2024); Supreme Court Case HCJ 5658/23 *Movement for Quality Government in Israel v. Knesset*, *Nevo* (1 Jan 2024).

194. *Letter to Attorney General Calling for Advancement of Appointment of Supreme Court President*, *Zulaf* (1 Jan 2024).

195. Yaron Druckman, *This Is the Judge Levin Refuses To Promote: Convicted Soldier Who Attacked Arab, Acquitted Rabbis of Incitement*, *Ynet* (12 Mar 2024).

Furthermore, Levin opposed Yitzhak Amit's appointment as Supreme Court President following Esther Hayut's retirement in October 2023 and has been on a crusade against him ever since. He defied a Supreme Court ruling requiring him to convene the Judicial Selection Committee, which then met without Levin in January 2025 and formally elected Amit, who had been serving as acting president. For his part, Levin declared that he does not recognize Amit as president and has been effectively boycotting him.¹⁹⁶ Netanyahu, Levin, and Knesset Speaker Amir Ohana absented themselves from Amit's swearing-in ceremony,¹⁹⁷ and at the opening of the Knesset's winter session in October 2025 Ohana failed to acknowledge him as Supreme Court President and referred to him as a "Supreme Court justice."¹⁹⁸

The "poison machine" operated by Netanyahu and his associates has been waging an incitement and disinformation campaign against the judiciary that includes false accusations about fabricated cases and political persecution of the Right in general and of Netanyahu personally aimed at toppling the right-wing government.¹⁹⁹

Since the outbreak of war on 7 October 2023, the "poison machine" has lashed out at the judiciary with conspiracy theories alleging its responsibility for the Hamas attack. These false accusations, along with the smear campaign against Supreme Court President Yitzhak Amit, are intended to prevent the establishment of a state commission of inquiry, given that under the law it is the President of the Supreme Court who is supposed to appoint its members and chair it. The alternative endorsed by the government is a political commission of inquiry under the pretext that it would be a "consensual national commission," which would also investigate issues such as the responsibility of the judiciary and of the public protest against the regime revolution for the October 7 massacre.²⁰⁰ Consequently, on 16 November 2025, the government decided to establish a non-state commission of inquiry,²⁰¹ and on 24 December 2025, the Knesset approved in a preliminary reading a bill by Likud MK Ariel Kallner to establish a political commission.²⁰²

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196. Chen Maanit, **Israel's Justice Minister Won't Recognize New Top Court President, Stirring a Constitutional Crisis*, *Haaretz* (26 Jan 2025).

197. Chen Maanit, **In First, Prime Minister and Justice Minister To Boycott Swearing-In of Israel's Supreme Court President*, *Haaretz* (13 Feb 2025).

198. Moran Azulay, *Ohana Addresses Supreme Court President as 'Judge'; Herzog: 'Disrespect!'; Netanyahu: Amit Is the Supreme Court's President*, *ynet* (20 Oct 2025).

199. Unattributed, **Netanyahu on Prosecution: 'This Is What an Attempted Coup Looks Like'*, *i24 News* (5 Apr 2021).

200. Dafna Liel, *Upcoming Inquiry Commission Expected To Investigate Judiciary Too*, *N12* (22 Dec 2025).

201. Noa Shpigel, **Netanyahu Government Orders October 7 Probe, Stops Short of State Commission of Inquiry*, *Haaretz* (16 Nov 2025).

202. Sam Sokol, **Contentious Law for Politically Appointed October 7 Probe Passes Preliminary Knesset Reading*, *The Times of Israel* (24 Dec 2025).

Persecution and Weakening of Attorney General

As part of the authoritarian measures led by the Netanyahu government, the "poison machine" has been running a sustained campaign of incitement and disinformation against the current Attorney General, Adv. Gali Baharav-Miara. Taking part in this campaign are government members who call for her dismissal, agitate against and defame her, and blame her for a wide range of failures that fall under the government's responsibility. For example, she was summoned to a session of the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee about rampant crime in Israel and in Arab society so that coalition members could accuse her of tying the hands of the police ("The Israel Police have no tools, because the Attorney General does not allow tools").²⁰³ Accusing her of being responsible for the flares fired toward Netanyahu's private residence in Caesarea, Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi said that her failure to act against the "lawlessness" of anti-government protesters was bringing Israel "closer by leaps and bounds to disaster, to the assassination of the prime minister.... If someone comes to kill you, including through weakness and agreement through silence, rise up and fire them."²⁰⁴

Beginning in November 2024, Netanyahu signaled the launch of an overt campaign to oust the Attorney General from office, claiming that she was "adversarial."²⁰⁵ In August 2025, the Netanyahu government decided to fire her in an unlawful process. First, the government approved Justice Minister Levin's proposal to change ad hoc the procedure for dismissing an Attorney General and to bypass the placement committee headed by former Supreme Court President Asher Grunis. Then, a ministerial committee headed by Minister Amichai Chikli held a pre-termination hearing, which Baharav-Miara refused to attend on the grounds that the process was illegal, and subsequently recommended to the government to fire her.²⁰⁶

Beginning in November 2024, Netanyahu signaled the launch of an overt campaign to oust the Attorney General from office, claiming that she was "adversarial." In August 2025, the Netanyahu government decided to fire her in an unlawful process

The Supreme Court immediately issued an interim order freezing her dismissal, and in December 2025 an expanded panel voided the government's decision altogether.²⁰⁷ In response, Levin and other ministers declared that they would continue to boycott her and ignore her professional opinions and Supreme Court rulings as before,²⁰⁸ despite Supreme Court Deputy President Noam Sohlberg's interim injunction in August 2025 sharply criticizing Karhi for calling

203. Noa Shpigel, Rothman Targeted Attorney General's Appearance at Constitution Committee - And Missed the Mark, *Haaretz* (18 Nov 2024).

204. Jeremy Sharon, Sam Sokol, and TOI Staff, *Ministers Rage at 'Anarchist' AG, With One Implying She's Trying To 'Kill' Netanyahu, *The Times of Israel* (17 Nov 2024).

205. Sam Sokol, Lazar Berman, and TOI Staff, *Netanyahu Demands 'Solution' to 'Adversarial' AG as Ministers Call for Her Ouster, *The Times of Israel* (4 Nov 2024).

206. Jeremy Sharon, *Government Fires Attorney General; High Court Immediately Freezes Her Dismissal, *The Times of Israel* (4 Aug 2025).

207. Chen Maanit, *Israel's High Court Annuls Netanyahu Government's Firing of Attorney General, Ruling It 'Unlawful', *Haaretz* (14 Dec 2025).

208. Chen Maanit, Impeachment of Attorney General: Organized, Planned and Unbridled Move, *Haaretz* (16 Dec 2025); Chen Maanit, *Israeli Government Escalates Boycott of Attorney General Despite Top Court's Ruling, *Haaretz* (22 Oct 2025).

on Communications Ministry employees to boycott the Attorney General: "The conduct of the communications minister in this matter is serious and undermines fundamental principles of the rule of law,"²⁰⁹ he said, noting that Karhi's words carried added weight since he directed his staff not to abide by her legal opinions.

The move to dismiss Baharav-Miara stems from disputes over her professional decisions and legal interpretations, which at times run contrary to the government's wishes, as well as from her approval of criminal investigations against government ministers in a series of corruption cases. The crusade against her is part of a broader process aimed at intimidating and weakening judges and the justice system as a whole, undermining their independence, and dismantling oversight mechanisms over government actions.

Criminal prosecution policy in Israel is determined by the Attorney General's directives and is grounded in the principle of prosecutorial independence from political involvement. Her approval or instructions are explicitly required to investigate and launch criminal proceedings against public officials, journalists, and lawyers for offenses connected to their jobs, as well as to investigate ordinary citizens for verbal and protest offenses or offenses under the Emergency Defense Regulations. Through the ministerial legal counsels, the Attorney General instructs the government to comply with its obligations under the law, court rulings, and administrative law principles, including the protection of human and civil rights and equitable budgeting. Her removal from office and replacement with a political loyalist would open the door to granting absolute immunity to the prime minister, government ministers, coalition MKs, violent police officers, and corrupt local council heads, and to halting criminal proceedings currently pending against them. Given the breadth of an Attorney General's powers, this would cause grave damage to the rule of law and have far-reaching consequences for human rights and the lives of all Israeli citizens.²¹⁰

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Here is one of many examples of what is likely to occur if the government succeeds in naming a servile Attorney General and in freely intervening in criminal proceedings: after the Attorney General refused a police request to investigate MK Naama Lazimi (Democrats party) on a false accusation that she had obstructed a police officer during a protest, Minister Levin threatened her from the Knesset plenum: "I want to tell you, MK Lazimi, that the protection you enjoy, on behalf

209. Chen Maanit, *High Court Freezes Attorney General Ousting Until Petitions Against Dismissal Are Resolved, Haaretz (11 Aug 2025).

210. Eitay Mack, *Efforts To Dismiss Attorney General: Direct Blow to Israel's Democracy and Civil Rights, Zulat (23 Mar 2025).

of those who are supposed to ensure equal enforcement of the law, will also end, and we are on our way there.... I'm not threatening, I'm letting you know - the days are over, the days are over."²¹¹

It should be noted that beyond the personal and professional persecution of Baharav-Miara, the coalition has been advancing several legislative proposals intended to weaken the institution of the Attorney General and subordinate it to the government. Bills to strip an Attorney General of its general prosecution powers passed a preliminary hearing on 29 October 2025,²¹² while a bill granting the Minister of Justice

the authority to appoint a special prosecutor who could investigate an Attorney General and a State Attorney passed a preliminary hearing on 10 December 2025. The practical purpose of the latter is to incite against the Attorney General and the State Attorney's Office by portraying them as entities of dubious integrity.²¹³

Subordination of Police to Political Echelon

One of the Netanyahu government's most salient successes has been the political takeover of the Israel Police. The process began just before the swearing-in of the 37th government, with the approval of Amendment No. 37 to the Police Ordinance-1971 (New Version) and the appointment of Itamar Ben-Gvir as Minister of National Security. In January 2025, the Supreme Court annulled the article in Amendment 37 that granted the minister authority to determine investigative policy and interpreted other articles in ways that limited the minister's powers.²¹⁴ However, the ruling came "a little too little and a little too late" to reverse the politicization of the police through the abuse of ministerial appointments, as detailed below.

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As a result of this politicization, widespread evidence has accumulated of wrongful arrests and violence toward demonstrators, delays and hesitance in investigations of political figures, an incompetent war on crime and organized criminal organizations, selective enforcement, promotion of officers who used violence against civilians, as well as an attempt to fire Israel Police's legal counsel.²¹⁵

Netanyahu's protest suppression policy was first applied to demonstrations against the regime revolution, and after the outbreak of war in October 2023, also against public protests demanding the release of the hostages held in Gaza, the end of the war, and the establishment of a state commission of inquiry to hold Netanyahu and other actors accountable for the debacle. As a result, large numbers of protesters were arrested, some sustaining permanent bodily harm.²¹⁶

211. Aryeh Rivkind, *Minister Yariv Levin to MK Lazimi: 'The Protection You Enjoy Will End - And We Are on Our Way There', *Haredim10* (10 Dec 2025).

212. Yifat Solel, *The Laws To Split the Attorney General's Position: Abolishment of Independence, *Zulat* (6 Nov 2025).

213. Yifat Solel, *Bill for Persecution of the Attorney General, *Zulat* (15 Dec 2025).

214. Supreme Court Case HCJ 8987/22 Movement for Quality Government in Israel v .Knesset, *Nevo* (2 Jan 2025).

215. Eitay Mack, The Police Commissioner's Call to Rebellion, *The Seventh Eye* (26 Oct 2024).

216. Eitay Mack, *Ben-Gvir's Police Exploits Law Deficiencies To Suppress Protests, *Zulat* (4 Mar 2024).

During the war, the police sweepingly restricted the freedom of expression and assembly of the Arab public in accordance with the political campaign waged by Minister Ben-Gvir and his Otzma Yehudit party colleagues, framing all Arabs as a security risk and claiming that "Guardian of the Walls 2"²¹⁷ was imminent. Among other measures, the police banned protests in Arab towns in violation of legal rulings and directives,²¹⁸ prohibited the display of Palestinian flags and anti-war signs,²¹⁹ and carried out humiliating and politically motivated arrests of artists, public figures, academics, and professionals of Arab descent.²²⁰

In late August 2025, Ben-Gvir issued a set of instructions to the police further restricting protest rights. The Attorney General responded that the instructions were invalid, as they violated the terms of the agreement endorsed by the Supreme Court as a condition for his continued tenure as national security minister.²²¹ In December 2025, against the backdrop of several petitions filed with the Supreme Court challenging Ben-Gvir's reappointment, the Attorney General wrote to Prime Minister Netanyahu demanding his intervention regarding Ben-Gvir's repeated violations of the law: "These are substantive violations repeated time and again in numerous contexts, which turn the law establishing the principle of police independence... into a dead letter."²²²

On 1 January 2026, the Attorney General informed the Supreme Court that, in her view, the justices should issue an injunction requiring Netanyahu to explain why he has not removed Ben-Gvir from office: "Ben-Gvir is abusing his position to unacceptably influence police activity in the most sensitive fields of law enforcement and is undermining fundamental democratic principles.... The many expressions of his unacceptable interference in the police's work, his violations of the law and of explicit court rulings on this issue, create a clear and harsh picture of repeated violations of the principle of the police's independence." She added that his interference spans multiple areas within police domain: "This is an ongoing [and sometimes sophisticated] campaign of unacceptable pressure on police officers and commanders.... There is a repeated pattern of violations of the law and contempt for the rule of law, and not just in isolated cases.... The minister's moves to interfere in the work of the police are becoming a norm and a habit, and the concern over their negative effects is not theoretical but tangible. It is even possible that this could cause irreversible damage."²²³

The political takeover of the Israel Police has largely been achieved through Minister Ben-Gvir's constant interference with their day-to-day operations, as well as the replacement of their chain of command and the appointment of Commissioner Danny Levi, who is

The political takeover of the Israel Police has largely been achieved through Minister Ben-Gvir's constant interference with their day-to-day operations

217. Official name of IDF military operation against terror organizations in the Gaza Strip in May 2021.

218. See footnote #216.

219. Lidor Sultan, *Hoisting PLO Flag in Israel: What Does the Law Say?*, *Israel Hayom* (20 Nov 2024).

220. Chen Maanit, *State Attorney: Police Opened Several Unauthorized Investigations for Incitement During the War*, *Haaretz* (11 Jul 2024).

221. Chen Maanit and Josh Breiner, **AG Tells Ben-Gvir His Plan To Limit Protests Has No Legal Basis, Warns of 'Blatant Violation' of Court Agreement*, *Haaretz* (1 Sep 2025).

222. Jeremy Sharon, **AG to Netanyahu: Ben Gvir's Violations of Police Independence Justify Demands for Dismissal*, *The Times of Israel* (2 Dec 2025).

223. Chen Maanit and Josh Breiner, **AG to Top Court: Netanyahu Must Explain Why He Hasn't Fired Ben-Gvir Over Abuse of Office*, *Haaretz* (1 Jan 2026).

considered personally loyal to the minister. Media reports revealed that already back when he was serving as Coastal District Commander, Levi reported directly to Ben-Gvir on the preparations for anti-government demonstrations and the measures to prevent the display of Palestinian flags, despite the ban on independent contact with the minister issued by the previous commissioner, Kobi Shabtai.²²⁴

Furthermore, Ben-Gvir deepened his control over the police by personally interviewing hundreds of officers in order to control the command structure. Loyalty shifted from the public interest to Ben-Gvir personally. Information obtained through freedom-of-information requests indicates that, in an unprecedented departure from the practice of his predecessors, Ben-Gvir personally interviewed 137 candidates for various positions (109 station commanders in 2024 and 28 in 2023) during his first two years as national security minister. He claimed the number was actually higher in 2024, at 138, and boasted of his hands-on relationship with mid-level officers.²²⁵ While Article 7 of the Police Ordinance grants the minister authority to appoint officers from the rank of deputy-commander and above,²²⁶ no previous minister had ever before personally conducted interviews and selected officers starting from the level of station commanders. Media reports indicate that Ben-Gvir assessed police candidates primarily on their loyalty to him rather than their fealty to the rule of law.²²⁷ Responding to the reports about his "loyalty test," he said: "I tell you in the bluntest way: every officer who comes to me, I make sure to check if he'll implement my policy."²²⁸

In another case, when Ben-Gvir blocked the promotion of a female officer involved in the investigation of the cases against Netanyahu, Commissioner Levi and the Israel Police's legal counsel asked the Supreme Court to accept her petition and approve her promotion, despite Ben-Gvir's refusal. According to the legal opinion submitted to the court, the refusal constituted an "unprecedented and highly worrisome exception, given that the delay stems solely from political considerations unrelated to the promotion."²²⁹

In a previous letter dated 14 November 2024, in response to petitions filed with the Supreme Court, the Attorney General asked Netanyahu to revisit Ben-Gvir's tenure due to his interference in appointments: "In practice, the career progression and promotion of hundreds of Israel Police officers hinges on the minister's will. Administrative evidence suggests that the minister is using his authority to promote or terminate tenure in ways that constitute improper interference in the operations of the police. Moreover, the minister's grip on the police, along with his direct, hands-on influence over officers' careers and his seemingly improper interference in operational matters, undermines any assurance that the police serve the public interest rather than the political echelon."²³⁰ She went on to note that, since his appointment, Ben-Gvir had repeatedly and unlawfully interfered in police operations in defiance of court decisions, including making

224. Josh Breiner, [Correspondence Reveals: Danny Levy Was in Direct Contact With Ben-Gvir and Aides Before Being Appointed Police Commissioner](#), *Haaretz* (11 Nov 2024).

225. Efrat Forsher, [Too Involved? Ben-Gvir Conducted Huge Number of Interviews With Police Officers](#), *Walla* (9 Feb 2025).

226. [Police Ordinance\] 1971-New Version\]](#), *Nevo* (last updated 13 May 2025).

227. Josh Breiner, [Ben-Gvir Asks Police Officers Up for Promotion If 'They Will Be Loyal'](#), *Haaretz* (12 Dec 2024).

228. TOI Staff, [*Ben-Gvir Says He Promotes Cops Only If They Implement His Policy](#), *In Dig at AG*, *The Times of Israel* (12 Jan 2025).

229. Josh Breiner, [Police Commissioner: Ben-Gvir's Refusal To Promote Female Officer Who Testified at Netanyahu's Trial Might Intimidate Corruption Investigators](#), *Haaretz* (11 Nov 2025).

230. [Attorney General's Letter :Position Regarding Tenure of National Security Minister](#), published in *Ynet* (14 Nov 2024).

statements likely to intimidate law enforcement from fulfilling their duties and to delegitimize Mahash investigations of police staff.

Another example of Ben-Gvir's interference was revealed by journalist Ilana Dayan, who published Shin Bet Chief Ronen Bar's opinion, attached to a letter sent to the IDF Chief of Staff by then-IDF Central Command General Yehuda Fuchs, whereby "the police are not enforcing the law on Jewish terror actors in Judea and Samaria at Minister Ben-Gvir's instructions."²³¹ Ben-Gvir did not deny issuing such a directive.

Reports also emerged that a criminal investigation had been opened against Israel Prison Service Commissioner Kobi Yakobi and senior police officers for suspected corruption, based on allegations of bribery in exchange for promotions.²³² One of the suspects was Deputy Commissioner Avishai Moalem, commander of the Samaria District's Central Unit (Yamar) in charge of nationalist crime cases, who allegedly leaked classified information from investigation files to Ben-Gvir.²³³ On 4 February 2025, Ben-Gvir's bureau chief Hanamel Dorfman was questioned on suspicion of receiving classified information from Moalem about Jewish terrorist activists and nationalist crime and of attempting to influence investigations.²³⁴

In addition to his control over the police, a "National Guard" was established in January 2025, officially under the Border Police's command but in practice functioning as a security unit of Ben-Gvir's Ministry of National Security. Its creation was justified as necessary to combat crime and serious disturbances, but already then Zulat warned that it would become a political militia under Ben-Gvir and the government, a warning that pretty soon materialized.²³⁵ According to media reports, the National Guard primarily serves as an arm for suppressing anti-government protests.²³⁶

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Appointment of Shin Bet Chief Politically Loyal to Prime Minister

The process initiated by the government in March 2025 to dismiss then-Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar (later pronounced unlawful by the Supreme Court²³⁷) was driven by Prime Minister Netanyahu's efforts to obstruct an effective investigation into the October 7 massacre, shift

231. Ilana Dayan, [Document Submitted to IDF Chief of Staff and Shin Bet Chief's Opinion on Ben-Gvir's Directive](#), *N12* (23 Nov 2023).

232. Unattributed, [*Israel Prisons Chief Arrested for Obstructing Probe Into Ben-Gvir](#), *Middle East Monitor* (3 Dec 2024).

233. Efrat Forsher, [*Sensitive Material and Bribery: New Details on IPS Chief Scandal](#), *The Jerusalem Post* (3 Dec 2024).

234. Josh Breiner, [*Ben-Gvir Associates Summoned for Questioning in Investigation Into Prison Chief, Police Commander](#), *Haaretz* (3 Feb 2025).

235. Eitay Mack, [*Establishment of National Guard: Political Militia Subordinate to Minister Ben-Gvir](#), *Zulat* (13 Apr 2023).

236. Josh Breiner, Bar Peleg, and Nir Hasson, [National Guard Intended To Combat Crime Deployed To Disperse Anti-Government Protests](#), *Haaretz* (20 Mar 2025); Hagai Amit, [Two Brigades and Another One To Go: How National Guard Ended Up at Anti-Government Demonstrations](#), *TheMarker* (27 Mar 2025); Adar Gitsis, [Ben-Gvir's National Guard Steps Up Presence at Demonstrations](#), *N12* (4 Sep 2025).

237. Jeremy Sharon, [*High Court Rules Shin Bet Head's Dismissal 'Unlawful', PM Had 'Conflict of Interest'](#), *The Times of Israel* (21 May 2025).

primary responsibility for the calamity onto the Shin Bet and the IDF, and head off scrutiny of Qatargate, an affair in which aides in his office are suspected of leaking and falsifying security and intelligence documents and of receiving money and other benefits from Qatar.

In April 2025, after Bar announced that he would resign on 15 June, the government annulled the unlawful decision to fire him. However, in a brief to the court on petitions challenging his firing filed before the government's about-face, Bar stated that his ouster and the bad blood with the Prime Minister stemmed in part from the Shin Bet's investigation into the aforementioned affair, and that "a smear and delegitimization campaign is under way intended to intimidate investigative and law enforcement authorities." Bar also revealed that Netanyahu had sought to use Shin Bet capabilities against anti-government protesters and had asked him to draft a document affirming that the Prime Minister could not testify at his own trial because of security reasons.²³⁸

Subsequently, Netanyahu announced the appointment of retired IDF Major General David Zini as Shin Bet chief, despite the Attorney General's opposition due to a conflict of interest. Nevertheless, a compromise subsequently reached with Netanyahu and endorsed by the Supreme Court allowed the Prime Minister to present his candidate to the Senior Appointments Advisory Committee (also known as the Grunis Committee) as soon as the Shin Bet completed its part in the Qatargate investigation, with the caveat that the new chief "would not, directly or indirectly, take part in the investigation of the so-called Qatargate affair until the matter has been examined and settled by the Attorney General in the framework of a customary conflict-of-interest agreement."²³⁹

On 25 September 2025, the Grunis Committee approved Zini's appointment despite the petitions against him. Remarking that the petitioners submitted material indicating that Netanyahu had asked previous Shin Bet chiefs to undertake actions inconsistent with a democratic system, the committee said it expected Zini "to realize that being subordinate to the Prime Minister and the government does not legitimize such conduct."²⁴⁰ The remark came in response to disclosures that Zini had privately described the judicial system as a "dictatorship that controls the entire country"²⁴¹ and that Shin Bet chiefs "are first and foremost subordinate to the Prime Minister."²⁴²

Concerns over naming a Shin Bet chief aligned with Netanyahu extend beyond possible interference in the Qatargate investigation. Such an appointment could undermine the legal process, for example, by altering the Shin Bet's stance in the case or claiming no security

As its duties and powers are defined in broad and ambiguous language under the Shin Bet Service Law, making loyalty the decisive factor in the choice of a Shin Bet chief risks transforming the organization into Netanyahu's private law enforcement arm to be used for forceful internal repression

238. Tova Zimuki and Gilad Cohen, [What Shin Bet Chief Ronen Bar's Defense Brief Against Netanyahu Expected To Include and When Will He Resign](#), *Ynet* (19 Apr 2025).

239. Netael Bandel, [Following Government-AG Agreement: Supreme Court Approves Compromise on Appointment of Shin Bet Chief](#), *Ynet* (13 Jul 2025).

240. Yael Yaffe, [Grunis Committee Unanimously Approves Netanyahu's Nominee: David Zini - Next Shin Bet Chief](#), *N12* (25 Sep 2025).

241. Gidi Weitz and Yaniv Kubovich, [*Like a Dictatorship*: Netanyahu's Candidate To Lead Shin Bet Slams Israeli Judicial System](#), *Haaretz* (30 Jun 2025).

242. Eitay Mack, [A Private Shin Bet](#), *The Seventh Eye* (18 Jul 2025).

breach was committed. Moreover, as its duties and powers are defined in broad and ambiguous language under the Shin Bet Service Law, thereby enabling potential abuse by the Prime Minister who is in charge of it by law, making loyalty the decisive factor in the choice of a Shin Bet chief risks transforming the organization into Netanyahu's private law enforcement arm to be used for forceful internal repression. Notably, the Shin Bet has extensive authority to conduct arrests, investigations, surveillance, and intelligence gathering. At the same time, due to the exceptional roles and powers granted to it by law and the secrecy surrounding its operations, judicial, public, and media scrutiny of its activity is extremely limited.²⁴³

These concerns have already started to come true. At the end of December 2025, the Shin Bet summoned prominent anti-government protesters to "warning" meetings. In one case, an activist was told she would be questioned by police, but upon arriving at the station, she was interrogated by Shin Bet agents, in defiance of a Supreme Court ruling requiring the police to notify an interogatee up front that they were not under investigation. The activist reported that a female agent tried to persuade her to cooperate with the Shin Bet. In another case, an agent threatened a prominent protester who regularly demonstrated outside Minister Amichai Chikli's home in Kibbutz Hanaton that the police would be called if he failed to show up to the meeting.²⁴⁴

Unlike previous chiefs, Zini agreed to involve the Shin Bet in combatina crime in the Arab sector, and the government decided to allocate a budget for joint operations with the police²⁴⁵ despite the fact that, under the law, the Shin Bet is not authorized to deal with non-security criminal offenses, raising concerns that this could serve as a pretext to expand its operations to all citizens. In a previous attempt to involve the Shin Bet, in June 2023, the Attorney General had warned that "even under the current legal provisions, using the Shin Bet for national interests is problematic... and amending the Shin Bet Law will harm democracy."²⁴⁶

Promoting Policy of Unaccountability and Infringement of Rule of Law

The Netanyahu government has advanced a series of bills that weaken the independence and professionalism of criminal prosecution. As mentioned above, one such bill aiming to incite against the Attorney General and the State Attorney proposes the appointment of a special prosecutor empowered to investigate the two.²⁴⁷ In addition, the government is promoting a bill that would

The government is promoting a bill that would place Mahash (Israel Police's Internal Investigations Department) under the Minister of Justice. It is part of a broader "investigate-the-investigators" campaign led by the Prime Minister and his associates, which conveniently suits coalition MKs and ministers whose offices are under investigation

243. Eitay Mack, **Appointing Political Associate as Shin Bet Chief Might Lead to Dictatorial-Style Internal Repression*, *Zulot* (28 Jan 2025).

244. Bar Peleg and Josh Breiner, **Shin Bet Summoned Prominent Anti-Government Protesters for 'Cautionary' Talks*, *Haaretz* (31 Dec 2025).

245. Josh Breiner and Ran Shimoni, **Israel To Redirect \$68 Million From Arab Social Programs to Shin Bet, Police*, *Haaretz* (15 Dec 2025).

246. Itamar Eichner, Meir Turgeman, and Tova Tzimuki, *Bringing Shin Bet Into Arab Sector: Agency Objected, Ben-Gvir Pressured, and Netanyahu Ruled: Committee Will Be Established*, *Ynet* (11 Jun 2023).

247. Yifat Solel, **Bill for Persecution of the Attorney General*, *Zulot* (15 Dec 2025).

place Mahash (Israel Police's Internal Investigations Department) under the Minister of Justice.²⁴⁸ It is part of a broader "investigate-the-investigators" campaign led by the Prime Minister and his associates, which conveniently suits coalition MKs and ministers whose offices are under investigation. Subordinating Mahash to Minister Levin would intensify attempts to politicize its work and erode the critical barrier between political considerations and investigative work, mirroring the politicization undergone by the Israel Police under National Security Minister Ben-Gvir.

According to the proposed law, Mahash's budget would be "drafted by the Minister of Justice in coordination with the department head." Control over budgets is a key method used by the government to advance the so-called regime revolution. This control would allow the government to set law enforcement priorities, for example, by reducing enforcement against police officers who infringe on freedom of protest. The bill also proposes that the Minister of Justice appoint a "coordination officer" to determine how investigations should proceed when suspicions involve both a police officer and a civilian. This government appointee could freeze or interfere with investigations against ministers and their cronies whenever a frivolous complaint is filed against the police officers investigating them.

Another example of the effort to weaken and undermine public trust in Mahash is Ben-Gvir's public support for officers under investigation. He tried to promote Meir Suissa to deputy commissioner and appoint him commander of a Tel Aviv station, despite Mahash's ongoing criminal proceedings against him for throwing stun grenades at anti-government protesters. After Jerusalem District Court Judge Nimrod Fleks froze the appointment, Ben-Gvir declared it "a disastrous decision. We are talking of an appointment that fully complies with law and regulations, whereas the one who acted unlawfully is the Attorney General."²⁴⁹

Another striking example of encouraging impunity and resisting accountability is the coalition's backing of a group of IDF reservists who in July 2025 were accused of abusing a Palestinian detainee at the Sde Teiman detention facility. Some coalition MKs even joined the mob that broke into the base to show support for the soldiers and remonstrate against their investigation.²⁵⁰ Following the leak of footage of the abuse by the Military Advocate General, Prime Minister Netanyahu labeled it "the most severe public relations attack that the State of Israel has experienced since its establishment."²⁵¹ While the leak was under investigation, Netanyahu and some ministers tried to accuse the Attorney General of being involved, despite the police affirming that this was impossible. Also, Justice Minister Levin insisted on naming Judiciary Ombudsman Asher Kula as the supervising judge in the investigation, even after the Supreme Court nixed the appointment.²⁵²

248. [Bill on Amendment of Police Ordinance\) 2022-Internal Investigations Department](#)(, *Knesset National Legislation Repository* (last updated 19 May 2025); Tal Hilel, [*Mahash Subordination Law: Finalizing Takeover of Law Enforcement Authorities 'From Above'](#), *Zulat* (4 Feb 2026).

249. Josh Breiner, [Court Freezes Promotion of Police Officer Meir Suissa on Trial for Throwing Stun Grenade at Protesters](#), *Haaretz* (5 Sep 2024).

250. TOI Staff, [*Lawmakers Who Broke Into IDF Base During Far-Right Riot To Be Investigated by Police](#), *The Times of Israel* (27 Mar 2025).

251. Media statement, [*PM Netanyahu at the Start of the Government Meeting](#), *Prime Minister's Office* (2 Nov 2025).

252. Eli Senyor, [Investigation of Military Advocate General Affair Ends; Attorney General Not Involved](#), *Reshet 13* (18 Dec 2025).

To increase Netanyahu's immunity in the Eli Feldstein affair,²⁵³ the government has promoted bills that broadly permit disclosure of classified information to the Prime Minister, ministers on the Knesset National Security Committee, and the chair of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.²⁵⁴ These proposals undermine existing oversight mechanisms and professional clearance procedures, as they would empower ministers to intervene in criminal proceedings and provide immunity to favored individuals, including themselves. They would also allow Netanyahu, the ministers, and the committee chair to request sensitive information on political opponents or data that could be used to advance personal-political interests.

The government is also advancing a bill establishing criminal and civil immunity for MKs as a default, unless a motion is approved by 90 MKs - a near-impossible barrier.²⁵⁵ If passed, legislators would be immune from investigation and prosecution even for serious offenses, such as sexual crimes and election law violations. Such legislation could enable the Prime Minister and ministers who are also MKs to evade prosecution, incentivize criminals to seek election to the Knesset, and in extreme cases, facilitate collusion between legislators and organized crime.

Finally, since the October 7 attack, the Prime Minister and his ministers have shirked responsibility for war, running a continuous campaign to cast the blame on the heads of the security and military establishment, anti-regime revolution protest leaders, and others. As part of this effort, the government submitted a bill, through MK Ariel Kallner, to set up a political investigative committee, dubbed the "National-State Investigative Committee."²⁵⁶ This is a fundamentally flawed legislative move, aimed at preempting a Supreme Court ruling that would compel the government to establish a proper state commission of inquiry under the State Commissions of Inquiry Law-1969²⁵⁷ and no other form of committee.²⁵⁸

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Control of the Media

Unlike fully authoritarian regimes, where the media is an absolute propaganda tool directly controlled by the state, competitive authoritarian regimes typically rely on indirect methods, such

253. Eli Feldstein was appointed Netanyahu's spokesman for military affairs a few days after the October 7 massacre, despite having failed to obtain security clearance from the Shin Bet. A year later he was arrested and charged with disclosing classified information with the intent to harm the state, after he leaked documents to the German newspaper *Bild* in an effort to blame Hamas for a breakdown in the negotiations on the release of hostages.

254. Eitay Mack, *"Feldstein Law": Blanket Immunity for Political Use of Classified Information*, *Zulat* (14 Jan 2025).

255. Eitay Mack, *"Proposed Amendment of Immunity Law: Turning the Knesset Into a Safe Haven for Criminals*, *Zulat* (28 Jan 2025).

256. *Bill on National-State Investigative Committee on Events of 7 October 2023 Massacre2025-*, *Knesset National Legislation Repository* (15 Dec 2025).

257. *State Commissions of Inquiry Law1969-*, *Nevo* (last updated 18 Sep 2023).

258. Dafna Holtz-Lechner, *"Political Commission of Inquiry Disguised as National Investigation*, *Zulat* (12 Dec 2025).

as funding sympathetic outlets and conferring government legitimacy on biased coverage and "alternative truths," as defined by former Trump communications advisor Kellyanne Conway.²⁵⁹

The indictments against Netanyahu in Case 4000 and Case 2000 describe a complex pattern of corruption and abuse of state power to advance personal-political interests, particularly in the media sector. In Case 2000, he is accused of attempting to secure favorable coverage from Yedioth Ahronoth in exchange for undermining its competitor Israel Hayom, while in Case 4000 he is accused of promoting regulatory benefits worth around 1 billion shekels for the telecom conglomerate Bezeq in return for favorable coverage on the website Walla, both owned by businessman Shaul Elovitch. Netanyahu admitted in court that he personally intervened in questions related to the ownership of media outlets (as well as in their editorial lines and the identity of the journalists employed by them).²⁶⁰ Both cases illustrate how Netanyahu, throughout his terms, acted to bolster supportive media outlets and to weaken critics.

Since the formation of the 37th government, Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi has sought to advance a series of laws that restrict free media in order to make it more compliant and less critical, and to reorganize the media market to align with the government's political and economic interests in order to benefit loyalists.

Since the formation of the 37th government, Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi has sought to advance a series of laws that restrict free media in order to make it more compliant and less critical, and to reorganize the media market to align with the government's political and economic interests in order to benefit loyalists

Competitive authoritarian regimes resort to several key practices to suppress independent media and effectively control it, often through indirect means rather than overt repression. In Netanyahu's Israel, this is evident in the delegitimization of critical outlets, emasculation of public broadcasting, domination acquired through regulation and economic tools (such as selective sanctions and benefits), legal and financial harassment, and restrictions on foreign media. These mechanisms are detailed below.

Delegitimization of the Media

Over the years, Netanyahu has systematically employed increasingly extreme rhetoric against prominent journalists and media outlets, and as head of the 37th government he has advanced inciteful and defamatory pronouncements about media organizations he regarded as critical. In public statements, speeches, and even legal testimony, Netanyahu claimed that the media collaborates with the "deep state"²⁶¹ and equated some outlets to the terrorist organization Hamas.²⁶²

Neither has he shied away from attacking specific journalists personally. For instance, during a press conference, he lashed out at Channel 12 journalist Yolan Cohen when she spoke about

259. Alexandra Jaffe, **Kellyanne Conway: WH Spokesman Gave 'Alternative Facts' on Inauguration Crowd*, *NBC News* (22 Jan 2017).

260. See footnotes #13 and 14. Itamar Baz, *'I Told Shaul Elovitch: Replace the Journalists, Change Walla'*, *The Seventh Eye* (12 Dec 2024).

261. Chantal Da Silva and Yarden Segev, **Netanyahu Rails Against the 'Deep State' in Tirade Rejecting Court-Led Probe Into Oct. 7 Attacks*, *NBC News* (4 Mar 2025).

262. Bini Aschkenasy, *Netanyahu's Testimony: After the Article, I Understood Why They Called Them 'Walla Hamas'*, *Walla* (27 Jan 2025).

the suffering of the families of hostages held by Hamas and the struggle for their release, telling her: "There's no end to your lies."²⁶³ To Kan 11 journalist Michael Shemesh he said: "How much fake news can you fabricate? You're working overtime on it."²⁶⁴ On another occasion, the Prime Minister's Office issued a scathing statement against journalists Uri Misgav (who works for Haaretz, a newspaper boycotted by the government) and Barak Ravid: "Fake-news instigators have lost all restraint in spreading their lies in a vile propaganda campaign. They echo Hamas propaganda and harm the State of Israel."²⁶⁵ At another press conference, Netanyahu shot back at Channel 12 journalist Almog Boker, who asked him about the conscription of Ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students: "That was not a question, that was a propaganda speech."²⁶⁶

This incitement and slander is not limited to Netanyahu, and has also been adopted by other cabinet members. For example, when a criminal investigation was opened against her after the "traffic light system" was exposed in Channel 13's investigative program Hamakor, Transportation Minister Miri Regev said: "The media and the prosecution joined forces. The investigation against me was launched by the media."²⁶⁷ Asserting his opposition to legislation aimed at protecting journalists from hostile harassment, Justice Minister Levin said from the Knesset podium that news journalists were mere "propagandists" and that "the situation is even worse than in totalitarian countries."²⁶⁸

Such conspiratorial and inflammatory attacks on journalists, media outlets, and civil society organizations seen as critical of the government, amplified by government-aligned journalists who serve as its mouthpieces, contribute to the decline of public trust in the media. For instance, Channel 14 host Yinon Magal accused Channel 12 journalist Amnon Abramovich: "He is guilty of October 7th!... The blood is on his hands! I personally blame him!"²⁶⁹ Also on Channel 14, participants in the program *The Patriots* discussed their so-called nominees for the "Panic Engineering Prize": "Sinwar's apologist Guy Peleg, 'Al-Jazeera-Talent' Raviv Drucker, 'Political Source' Yaron Avraham, 'Depression Affairs Commentator' Nadav Eyal, and 'Venom Report' Guy Rolnik" (Channel 12 and Kan 11 journalists).²⁷⁰

Conspiratorial and inflammatory attacks on journalists, media outlets, and civil society organizations seen as critical of the government, amplified by government-aligned journalists who serve as its mouthpieces, contribute to the decline of public trust in the media

263. Shirit Avitan Cohen, [Netanyahu Clashes With Channel 12 Reporter: 'There's No End to Your Lies'](#), *Israel Hayom* (9 Dec 2024); Ynet Staff, [Netanyahu Lashes Out at Journalists: 'Spread Fake News'; Journalists Union 'Sharply Denounces Incitement'](#), *Ynet* (9 Dec 2024).

264. Shuki Tausig, [Prime Minister Loses Control on Live TV, Attacks Journalists, Insults and Lies](#), *The Seventh Eye* (9 Dec 2024).

265. News Staff, [Netanyahu's Office Lashes Out at Barak Ravid: 'Echoes Hamas's Propaganda'](#), *Srugim*, 21 February 2025.

266. News Staff, [Netanyahu Explodes at Almog Boker on Live TV](#), *Srugim* (10 Aug 2025).

267. Michael Shemesh, [Regev in Cabinet Meeting on Ouster of Attorney General: 'Prosecution and Media Joined Forces Against Me'](#), *Kan 11* (23 Mar 2025).

268. Editorial, [Levin Incites Against Journalists](#), *Haaretz* (30 Jun 2023).

269. Shuki Tausig, [*Channel 12 Files Complaint Against Yinon Magal: 'Magal's Incitement Campaign Continues Without Any Restraints or Reins'](#), *The Seventh Eye* (11 May 2025).

270. The Seventh Eye, [Channel 14 Incites Against Competitors](#), *YouTube* (13 May 2024).

This delegitimization campaign is not confined to rhetoric but affects journalists' ability to do their work safely. There is documented evidence of on-the-job attacks on crews from Kan 11, Channel 12, and Channel 13, with assailants justifying their actions by claiming these newsmen belonged to "leftist channels."²⁷¹ According to the Journalists Under Attack Report published by the Union of Journalists in Israel, there were 61 assaults in 2023, 25 of them by an incited mob.

Hijacking of Public Broadcasting

The current Netanyahu government has pursued legislation aimed at weakening the Kan Public Broadcasting Corporation through privatization,²⁷² closure of its news division,²⁷³ and control over its budget.²⁷⁴ Communications Minister Karhi sought to commandeer appointments within Kan by naming retired judge Moshe Drori (who labeled Israeli media outlets "panic channels") as chairman of its placement committee. Upon entering office, Drori tried to sponsor Likud activists as committee members, but in response to a petition filed by Zulat,²⁷⁵ the Supreme Court froze the process and Drori later resigned.²⁷⁶ In March 2025 Karhi appointed retired judge Nechama Munitz, but within months he tried to get rid of her when she resisted his interventions in the placement process.²⁷⁷ This attempt was blocked by a Supreme Court interim order,²⁷⁸ after the State Attorney's Office asserted that Karhi's decision to fire her was "illegal" and adopted "in excess of authority and through improper interference, giving rise to serious concern that it was made on the basis of extraneous considerations."²⁷⁹

The current Netanyahu government has pursued legislation aimed at weakening the Kan Public Broadcasting Corporation through privatization, closure of its news division, and control over its budget

In August 2025, Defense Minister Yisrael Katz established a committee to examine the closure of IDF Radio in order to determine whether it "fulfills its original purpose."²⁸⁰ The committee largely consisted of political activists affiliated with Likud and right-wing organizations, and the minutes of its meetings show a clear bias against the station.²⁸¹ Indeed, the committee recommended its closure, and on 22 December 2025 the government approved Katz's proposal to implement the recommendation, with a planned shutdown by March 2026.²⁸² Following

271. Ran Boker, [News Companies: 'Our Reporters Were Attacked in Kiryat Ata'](#), *Ynet*, 11 November 2024.

272. Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*'Privatization' of IPBC: Termination of Public Broadcasting and Free Media in Israel](#), *Zulat* (25 Nov 2024).

273. Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*'Bill To Shut Down Kan Corporation's News Broadcasts: Another Effort To Harm Public Broadcasting and Free Media](#), *Zulat* (13 Jun 2025).

274. Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*'What's the Point of It If We Don't Control It?' - Bill on Government Control Over IPBC Budget](#), *Zulat* (19 Jan 2025).

275. Roy Silberstein, [*'Following Zulat's Petition: Retired Judge Drori Resigns as Chair of the Selection Committee for the Public Broadcasting Corporation Council](#), *Zulat* (28 Nov 2024).

276. Jasmin Gueta, [Setback for Karhi: Moshe Drori Resigns as Chairman of Kan Corporation's Search Committee](#), *TheMarker* (27 Nov 2024).

277. Jasmin Gueta, [Attorney General Reveals to Supreme Court Karhi's Pressures on Head of Kan Corporation's Search Committee Appointed by Him](#), *TheMarker* (8 Nov 2025).

278. Jasmin Gueta, [Supreme Court Issues Order Nisi Against Karhi, Greenlights Kan Corporation's Search Committee](#), *TheMarker* (1 Jan 2026).

279. Uri Sela, [State Attorney's Office Against Karhi: 'Exceeding His Authority, Serious Concern Over Extraneous Considerations'](#), *Walla* (25 Dec 2025).

280. Ronen Reingold, [*IDF Radio Under Attack: Public Broadcasting Resilience in Question](#), *Zulat* (4 Sep 2025).

281. Yaron Avraham, [*'People Act Like a Herd': Secret Protocols of Committee Recommending IDF Radio's Closure Revealed](#), *Niz* (21 Dec 2025).

282. Stav Levaton, Sam Sokol, and Jeremy Sharon, [*'Cabinet Votes To Shutter Army Radio, Overriding Legal and Press Freedom Concerns](#), *The Times of Israel* (22 Dec 2025).

petitions and legal opinions, including that of the Attorney General, the Supreme Court issued an interim injunction freezing the closure until it had ruled on the petitions.²⁸³ One of the arguments cited by the Attorney General was "serious concern that the closure of the station was preordained" and that the committee "failed to give genuine consideration to alternative options recommended in the past, despite the need to minimize the inevitable harm to freedom of expression that would be caused by the station's closure."

Use of Economic and Regulatory Tools

Competitive authoritarian regimes do not typically impose blanket censorship on the media, but instead seek to shape the media market in ways that serve the ruling parties, while preserving a façade of pluralism. One of the central practices used to this end is the deployment of economic and regulatory tools to reward loyal media outlets and hurt critical ones. Netanyahu's government is acting systematically to create a biased media structure via discriminatory budgeting and legislation and through the abuse of public resources.

The government's foremost step to strengthen loyal media has been to prioritize Channel 14. Beyond its de facto monopoly on interviews with Netanyahu, Channel 14 receives extraordinary legislative and regulatory advantages.²⁸⁴ Minister Karhi twice extended temporary orders custom-made to benefit the channel to allow its continued operation as a "small license" broadcaster, thereby exempting it from numerous regulatory obligations and limitations on news and current affairs broadcasts²⁸⁵ that are binding on other small channels and despite ratings that at times surpass those of Kan 11 and Channel 13.²⁸⁶ In addition, Netanyahu's coalition has promoted laws requiring private companies to advertise on Channel 14, despite some commercial entities refusing to do so due to the inflammatory language used on the channel.²⁸⁷ So much so that the Knesset Economic Committee was summoned for an extraordinary session to discuss the matter.²⁸⁸

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Since the establishment of the government, Karhi has also sought to grant regulatory benefits to regional radio stations owned by cronies, which would expand their frequencies to nationwide coverage. After several failed legislative attempts²⁸⁹ and under cover of the war with Iran, he demanded from the Second Authority for Television and Radio to expand the franchise areas

283. Netael Bandel, [Supreme Court President Amit Issues Interim Order :Decision To Shutter IDF Radio Frozen](#), *Ynet* (28 Dec 2025).

284. Itamar Baz, [Channel 14 in Response to Supreme Court: Government Not Flooding Us With Money But Repairing Injustice](#), *The Seventh Eye* (11 Nov 2025).

285. Tal Hilel, [*Government Uses Regulatory Benefits To Establish Channel 14 as Propaganda Arm](#), *Zulat* (1 Oct 2024).

286. It should be noted that the directives and benefits decided upon apply to other entities as well. However, circumstances indicate that they are primarily intended to confer benefits on *Channel 14*.

287. Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*Government Promotes Bill Aimed at Diverting Advertising Budgets to Channel 14](#), *Zulat* (12 Jun 2025).

288. Nati Tucker, ['Did You Speak With Your Oligarch This Morning?' Bitan Assailed for Decision To Hold Discussion About Advertising on Channel 14](#), *TheMarker* (11 Sep 2024).

289. Amit Schejter and Adi Shay, [*Karhi's Law To Expand Regional Radio Broadcasts: Unconstitutional and Harmful to Democracy](#), *Zulat* (7 Feb 2024).

of the radio stations Kol Chai (owned by Yitzhak Mirilashvili, who also owns Channel 14), and Kol Barama (owned by Zvi Amar, who is close to Karhi). The decision was made contrary to the position of the ministry's legal counsel and without a tender.²⁹⁰

Another example is the ban on government advertising in the newspaper Haaretz. This is an economic sanction intended to hurt the financial resilience of a major critical media outlet, while diverting advertising budgets to media entities supportive of the government. In addition to the boycott of Haaretz, the Government Advertising Bureau's outlays on Channel 12 and Channel 13, which are perceived as critical of the government, have dropped by tens of percent under the current government, while its allocation for Channel 14 has shot up by more than 500%.²⁹¹ Following a petition to the Supreme Court submitted by Zulat and the Fair Regulation Movement, the state was compelled to admit that advertising budgets had been allocated unlawfully on the basis of political considerations and committed to correct the procedures. However, as noted, legislation was concurrently advanced with the purpose of forcing private companies to advertise on Channel 14.²⁹²

In addition, Channel 14 received benefits in the form of exempt payment for use of the Idan Plus platform and transfer of its debts to the Kan Corporation.²⁹³ This step effectively constitutes not only preferential treatment, but also lays the structural foundation for unequal competition in the media market. At the same time, the Ratings Law, introduced both as a private member's bill and through the government's Broadcast Media Law, enables manipulation of viewership data in an effort to create a picture showing inflated ratings for channels identified with the government that do not reflect actual viewing habits and carry dire economic consequences.²⁹⁴

Finally, the draft Broadcast Media Law aggressively promoted by Karhi in disregard of the opinion of professionals and gatekeepers²⁹⁵ seeks to embed political control over the entire media market. It annuls barriers in the media-capital-government nexus, expands cross-ownership, devalues journalistic commitments to ethics and reliable newsmaking, and replaces them with a flexible economic enforcement mechanism subject to regulatory-political control. According to the draft law, the new regulatory authority for television would fall under the minister's purview and would be assembled by a placement committee largely subordinate to the political echelon whose budget would be under political control.²⁹⁶ Thus, the law would not only retroactively codify all the benefits and exemptions conferred on Channel 14 over the years, but would also give the lie to the perverse rationale that stood behind them - favoritism of pro-government actors through regulatory and economic tools - and transform it into the defining principle of the media market.

290. Adiel Eithan Mustaki, *In Defiance of Legal Opinions: License of Ultra-Orthodox Radio Stations Extended Nationwide for 30 Days*, *Calcalist* (20 June 2025).

291. Itamar Baz, *Likud Ministers Boost Channel 14's Advertising Budgets by Over 500%*, *Shakuf* (27 Oct 2025).

292. Unattributed, *Petition to the High Court of Justice: Improper Dealings Between the Government and Channel 14*, *Zulat* (11 Feb 2025).

293. Although these benefits were also granted to other entities, the main idea was to aid Channel 14. Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, *Government Bill on Digital Channels Law: Favoring Tycoons at Public's Expense*, *Zulat* (5 Aug 2024).

294. Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, *Government Seeks Political Control Over Ratings Measurement*, *Zulat* (19 Jan 2025).

295. Nevo Trabelsy, *Attorney General's Office Opposes Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi's Move*, *Globes* (21 Sep 2025).

296. Ronen Reingold, *Bill To Shut Down Kan Corporation's News Broadcasts: Another Effort To Harm Public Broadcasting and Free Media*, *Zulat* (13 Jun 2025); Ronen Reingold, *The Objective: Broadcast Media Authority With Links to the Political Echelon*, *Zulat* (25 Dec 2025).

Taken together, all of these measures illustrate how economic regulation becomes an effective tool in the hands of a government seeking to strip critical media of its independence, while simultaneously granting structural and economic immunity to pro-government outlets. This amounts to the regulatory institutionalization of economic inequality in the media sphere, undermining a free press without overtly violating the rules of the game.

Legal Harassment

Typical of states experiencing democratic erosion, a common tactic under the current government is a surge in defamation lawsuits filed by cabinet members and Netanyahu himself, primarily targeting journalists and opposition activists.²⁹⁷

From their perspective, the tactic pays: even if they lose in court, they can portray the outcome as further evidence of the "deep state's" control over the judiciary. The lawsuits serve to intimidate potential witnesses, as well as Shin Bet and police investigators, discouraging them from broadening the scope of their inquiries to include them. This dynamic fosters self-censorship among journalists and deters ordinary citizens from speaking out. Moreover, in the absence of media exposés and constant public scrutiny, the likelihood of law-enforcement authorities (already under constant attack by Netanyahu's government) rising to the challenge is significantly reduced.

National Security Minister Ben-Gvir filed over 13 lawsuits in recent years against journalists, opposition activists, and political rivals, including Haaretz journalist Josh Breiner (for revealing that far-right activist Bentzi Gopstein, indicted on charges of incitement to racism and terror, had advised him on police matters) and former defense minister and IDF chief of staff Moshe Ya'alon (for saying in an interview that Ben-Gvir and his supporters "use non-Jewish and racist language").²⁹⁸

Netanyahu himself also filed numerous defamation lawsuits, such as in the context of the Qatargate affair; against opposition activist Itay Leshem (for a post on X);²⁹⁹ against Yair Golan, leader of the Democrats opposition party (for text messages posted on his behalf);³⁰⁰ and against Ya'alon (for remarks in a radio interview).³⁰¹ In addition, he sued the head of the Movement for Quality Government, which has been leading the legal battle against corruption

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Typical of states experiencing democratic erosion, a common tactic under the current government is a surge in defamation lawsuits filed by cabinet members and Netanyahu himself, primarily targeting journalists and opposition activists

297. Eitay Mack, *Like Cambodia*, *The Seventh Eye* (13 July 2025).

298. Oren Persico, *Itamar Ben-Gvir's Lawsuit Spree: Eight Lawsuits in One Year, And Who's Footing the Bill?*, *Shakuf* (19 Jun 2023).

299. Avraham Bloch, **Netanyahu Files Lawsuit Against Left-Wing Activist Over 'Qatargate' Statements*, *The Jerusalem Post* (26 Mar 2025).

300. Unattributed, **Netanyahu Sues Yair Golan Over 'Slander' He Sold Out Israel's Security to Qatar*, *JNS* (4 Apr 2025).

301. TOI Staff, **PM To Sue Ex-Defense Minister Ya'alon for Suggesting He Received Millions From Qatar*, *The Times of Israel* (12 Mar 2025).

under Netanyahu's governments (for remarks he made in an interview regarding the Submarine Affair),³⁰² as well as against prominent protest activist Attorney Gonen Ben-Yitzhak and journalists Uri Misgav and Ben Caspit (for their allegations that Netanyahu was concealing from the public information about his true medical condition).³⁰³

Government allies likewise abuse legal tools. Channel 14 host Yinon Magal sued Haaretz, The Seventh Eye, and the Israeli Audience Research Board for invasion of privacy after they exposed allegedly improper ties between him and members of the ratings panel that could attest to an attempt to influence viewership ratings.³⁰⁴ At the same time, the police initiated an investigation against Channel 13 journalist Aviad Glickman claiming that he had pushed an aide of Sara Netanyahu, who also works in Ben-Gvir's office, despite video footage clearly showing that he was rushing out of the court building and was not trying to shove her. According to reports, the police were pressured to open an investigation into the incident.³⁰⁵

Alongside the frequent use of defamation lawsuits, the government has promoted legislation to further expand the already broad parliamentary immunity from criminal and civil liability enjoyed by MKs, in contravention of the Attorney General's opinion that such a law would turn parliamentary immunity "into a de-facto sanctuary from criminal investigation, prosecution, and the filing of civil lawsuits."³⁰⁶

Closure of Foreign Media

Under the cover of the prolonged war, a marked tendency emerged to exclude foreign media from the public discourse, including through legislation authorizing severe sanctions against foreign broadcasting organizations. Citing the emergency situation, the government renewed temporary provisions shutting down foreign media outlets three times since the start of the war. At the same time, it advanced permanent legislation allowing the Ministers of Defense and Communications not only to close foreign media offices and seize equipment, but also to block websites and social media platforms.³⁰⁷ Submitted by MK Ariel Kallner (Likud), the bill to turn these temporary provisions into permanent law was approved by the Knesset on 2 December 2025. It will be valid for two years, regardless of whether there is a state of emergency in effect.³⁰⁸

Under the cover of the prolonged war, a marked tendency emerged to exclude foreign media from the public discourse, including through legislation authorizing severe sanctions against foreign broadcasting organizations

302. See footnote #11. Elinor Shirvani-Kofman, [Netanyahu Files Defamation Lawsuit Against Eliad Shraga, Who Responded: 'Pandora's Box Will Open'](#), *Israel Hayom* (2 Apr 2025).

303. Netael Bandel, [Judge Reviews Netanyahu's Medical File: 'No Evidence He Has Cancer and Hasn't Informed the Public'](#), *Ynet* (4 Mar 2024); Rania R.a. Abushamala, [*Israel's Netanyahu Sues 2 Journalists, Activist for 'Spreading Lies' About His Health](#), *Anadolu Ajansi* (5 Jun 2024).

304. Avishai Grinzaig, [post on X](#) (23 Jul 2025).

305. TOI Staff, [*Police Grill Legal Reporter Over Allegation He 'Shoved' Employee of Sara Netanyahu](#), *The Times of Israel* (9 Jul 2025).

306. Sam Sokol and TOI Staff, [*Likud Minister Asserts Government Has Right To Enact 'Regime Change' in Israel](#), *The Times of Israel* (24 Nov 2024).

307. Ronen Reingold and Ori Bassat, [*Bill To Shut Down Foreign Broadcaster Harms Democracy, Must Not Be Extended](#), *Zulat* (21 May 2021).

308. Noa Shpigel, [*Al-Jazeera Bill: Israel Extends Order Allowing Closure of Foreign Media Outlets - Even Without State of Emergency](#), *Haaretz* (23 Dec 2025).

So far, the temporary provision has primarily been invoked against Al-Jazeera and Al-Mayadeen, whose broadcasts in Israel were halted, as well as against the American news agency Associated Press, whose equipment was seized by the Communications Ministry based on the claim that its broadcasts were used by Al-Jazeera.³⁰⁹ Although the sanction against AP ended with the return of the equipment prompted by international criticism, it marked the new boundaries the state was setting for foreign journalistic broadcasting.

During the war with Iran, Ministers Karhi and Ben-Gvir issued a directive requiring foreign correspondents to obtain prior approval from the military censor for any relay from missile impact areas, including approval of the broadcasting location.³¹⁰ The directive, based on a new emergency order, drew sharp legal criticism from the Attorney General, who argued that it constituted unlawful ex ante censorship and a serious violation of press freedom.³¹¹ Junior police officers in the field were accordingly instructed to prevent journalists from documenting events at will, and were authorized to confiscate equipment and even carry out arrests. At the same time, far-right activist Yoav "Hatzel" Eliasi, embedded with a police auxiliary patrol, was caught on film conducting a form of selection between Israeli and foreign journalists, detaining Arab reporters and demanding to see their press cards.³¹² Indeed, the escalation did not spare Israeli Arab journalists: for example, Ali Mughrabi, a Channel 13 reporter, was expelled from the scene while reporting live.³¹³

Furthermore, according to international organizations dedicated to the protection of journalists, since the start of the war some 200 Gazan journalists were killed by IDF fire, attacks on Palestinian journalists in the West Bank and seizure of their equipment increased, and Israel continued to deny entry to international journalists into Gaza (with the Supreme Court upholding the ban).³¹⁴

It should be noted that alongside direct legislation targeting foreign media, the government also advanced the Associations Law.³¹⁵ While primarily aimed at civil society organizations, it could also be used to target independent media outlets registered as non-profit organizations.

In conclusion, the picture emerging from Netanyahu's media policy illustrates the workings of a competitive authoritarian system. Accordingly, in 2025 Israel dropped to the 112th place (out of 180 countries) in the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders

Submitted by MK Ariel Kallner (Likud), the bill to turn temporary provisions shutting down foreign media outlets into permanent law was approved by the Knesset on 2 December 2025. It will be valid for two years, regardless of whether there is a state of emergency in effect

309. Pierre Emmanuel Ngendakumana, **Israel Confiscates AP Equipment, Citing New Media Law*, *Politico* (21 May 2024).

310. Yoav Etziel and JP Staff, **Ben-Gvir and Karhi Crack Down on Foreign Press Coverage of War Damage in Israel*, *The Jerusalem Post* (20 Jun 2025).

311. Tamar Almog, *Attorney General to Ben-Gvir and Karhi: Explain Basis for Directives Restricting Work of Foreign Journalists*, *Kan 11* (20 Jun 2025).

312. Uri Sela, *Following Walla Report: 'Hatzel' Carried Out Selection of Journalists at Missile Impact Site in Tel Aviv*, *Walla* (22 June 2025).

313. Naama Barkan, *Channel 13 Reporter Expelled From Scene of Drone Crash in Beit She'an: 'Divisiveness Campaign by Ben-Gvir Government'*, *Ynet* (21 Jun 2025).

314. Eitay Mack, *The Smoking Camera*, *The Seventh Eye* (26 Aug 2025).

315. Eitay Mack, **Amendment to Associations Law: Spells Elimination of Civil Society Organizations*, *Zulaf* (19 Feb 2025).

(RSF), its lowest ranking since the index began.³¹⁶ This is the consequence of a cumulative set of steps, some of which may appear marginal individually, but collectively undermine the media's independence, public trust in it, and its ability to serve as an effective oversight mechanism.

In the legal opinion she submitted about the closure of IDF Radio, the Attorney General noted that the Israeli media market should be seen as "a single ecosystem" of news organizations, and that "at present, all components of the system, both public and commercial broadcasting, are under government attack." Therefore, the separate emasculation of individual components poses a "clear and immediate danger to the entire system."³¹⁷ In other words, the threat to free media in Israel is not the result of isolated reforms or regulatory disputes, but of a broad, consistent, and cumulative process that undermines the structural conditions for sustaining an independent media in a democracy and poses a serious threat to its ability to perform its vital role in a free society.

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316. Oren Persico, Israel Falls Yet Another 11 Places in Press Freedom Index, *The Seventh Eye* (2 May 2025).

317. Letter of Deputy Attorneys General on Draft Decision on 'Closure of IDF Radio Station', published in *Haaretz* (22 Dec 2025).

Conclusion and recommendations

In this document we sought to highlight the cumulative measures undertaken by Israel's 37th government since its formation and their significance for understanding the reality in the country at the beginning of 2026. As explained at the outset, after three years in office, the 37th government has not transformed Israel into a full dictatorship and the regime still retains democratic elements. However, it can no longer be classified as a flawed democracy in the conventional sense, as its authoritarian components are now too dominant and systematic.

In our view, the actions described throughout this report amount to a critical mass that has shifted the regime toward a defective or partial authoritarian system. In light of the changes Israel has undergone and the strategies employed by Netanyahu's government to consolidate power, the current regime is best defined as competitive authoritarian.

The democratic erosion in recent years has local causes and characteristics, most notably Prime Minister Netanyahu's motivation to secure immunity from criminal proceedings for himself and his associates, and his cooperation with actors espousing Kahanist or messianic agendas who are seeking to establish Jewish supremacy in the State of Israel. However, this decline also reflects global trends contributing to the weakening of liberal democracy worldwide.

The spread of democratic backsliding and the rise of partially or fully authoritarian leanings around the world, including in countries long considered stable democracies, has intensified attention to this issue across academia, journalism, the arts and popular culture, civil society discourse, human rights organizations, the legal community, and beyond. The foremost concern in these spheres is that the erosion of civil liberties and personal security within societies may lead to instability and violence. In addition, there is mounting anxiety over the dangers posed by a weakening of the foundations of the international order that was gradually built atop the ruins of World War II, which fostered a growing, albeit not absolute, inclination toward cooperation rather than confrontation.

Amid the many discussions of this phenomenon and its potentially disastrous consequences, particular attention has been given to the question of how to curb authoritarian trends and how countries can reinforce democratic foundations and liberal values, but there is no consensus on how this can be achieved.

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1. References in *English and **Portuguese. All other references in this document are in Hebrew.

TOI Staff, **Ex-Chief Justice Barak: Government's Judicial Reform Plan 'Will Strangle Democracy', The Times of Israel (6 Jan 2023).*

2. The Liveblog, **Ex-Chief Justice Barak: Israel 'No Longer a Liberal Democracy,' Is Now Under PM's 'One-Man' Rule, The Times of Israel (3 Jan 2023).*

3. Unattributed, **Smotrich: Supreme Court Chief Is 'Violent Megalomaniac,' Government Will 'Trample' Court, The Jerusalem Post (29 Dec 2025).*

4. Eitay Mack, **Pseudo Democracy: State of the Regime in Israel, Zulat (23 Jun 2022).*

The recommendations below draw on research by leading scholars such as Levitsky, Ziblatt,³¹⁸ Anne Applebaum,³¹⁹ and Larry Diamond,³²⁰ who emphasize the importance of consistent and sustained engagement against rising authoritarianism and competitive authoritarian regimes.

It is important to understand that Israel's competitive authoritarian regime is reversible, but the longer it persists, the greater the challenge of repair will be. The difficulties faced by democratic forces that likely to arise, and even to intensify, in Israel as well the longer Prime Minister Netanyahu's competitive authoritarian rule continues. For example, despite the electoral victories of democratic forces in Brazil (2022) and Poland (2023), efforts to restore liberal democracy in these countries have encountered three major obstacles:³²¹

- Past regimes retain significant support among citizens and members of parliament.
- The challenge lies not only in repealing or amending anti-democratic legislation, but also in the limited ability to replace officeholders appointed by previous regimes, since their substitution may be portrayed as an underhanded move to install political appointees. These holdovers constrain the ability of new governments to implement their agendas. For example, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal still includes judges appointed by the Law and Justice party, and their replacement encounters significant legal and political hurdles.
- Anxiety over a "cycle of retaliation": given the deep polarization and the absence of a clear and decisive majority in either the public or parliament, every shift of power risks prompting the victor to concentrate on persecuting the other side and wholesale reversing the actions of the previous government.

These challenges are directly linked to the policies of incitement, divisiveness, disinformation, and intimidation that the government's actions described in this document are designed to advance. This means that resistance is needed now, against every such step and against all attempts at coercion and agitation. There is no point in waiting for Netanyahu's government to cross yet another "red line" or in creating an artificial hierarchy among the various dangers posed by its anti-democratic actions, given that the main strategy of a competitive authoritarian regime, as described in this document, is to simultaneously inundate the system with multiple measures targeting democratic institutions, subjecting them to relentless attack and attrition in order to facilitate their hijacking and abuse by the government. Whether or not a specific anti-democratic law is

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319. Anne Appelbaum, **Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism, Doubleday (2020).*

320. Larry Diamond, **Ill Winds: Saving Democracy From Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency, Penguin Press (2020).*

321. John C Torpey, **Is Poland Back on Track? The Challenges for the New Government, CUNY Graduate Center (20 Dec 2023); Kathryn Baragwanath, *The New Lula Government Faces Significant Challenges on the Road to Zero-Deforestation, Australian Institute of International Affairs (8 Mar 2023); BTI Transformation Index, *Brazil Country Report 2024, Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024); Liam Hoare, *A Lesson for Israel? Poland Discovers How Hard It Is To Reintroduce Democracy After Years of Illiberal Rule, Haaretz (17 Apr 2024).*

ultimately passed by the Knesset, and whether or not the Supreme Court intervenes in a law or an administrative decision, from the perspective of Netanyahu's government the objective has already been achieved.

It is crucial to remember at all times that Israel remains a competitive authoritarian system, and is not a fully authoritarian one. This means that as long as democratic institutions exist, it is still possible to challenge Netanyahu's government using all available legal mechanisms. The government may continue to overwhelm the public and institutions, but significant opposition and civic pressure can counteract it. In competitive authoritarian regimes, leaders have an interest in retaining democratic structures because they serve as instruments of control. Therefore, as long as these structures remain, the opposition can also use them to challenge the government, take advantage of errors and failures, work ceaselessly toward restoring democracy, and at the very least slow the transition toward a full authoritarian regime.

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In these circumstances, it is essential to take a proactive approach by drafting legislative initiatives that counter harmful government bills and serve as a counterweight in the political arena, notwithstanding the inherent asymmetry between coalition and opposition and the slim chances of their enactment. Such initiatives are valuable because they influence public awareness and enhance the people's realization of the threats facing the state, society, and citizens. They also offer a pathway for concrete change, help sustain a crucial public debate, and are an additional means of instilling hope in the future, at a time when the risk is rapidly growing of apathy setting in out of a sense of resignation and helplessness.

As part of these efforts, Zulat places particular emphasis on advancing legislative initiatives aimed at protecting the professional independence of the judiciary and halting its erosion; initiatives to safeguard the civil service to ensure its ability to operate in a professional manner, free from political pressure; initiatives concerning participation in the political process, without which the status of the opposition could be severely undermined; initiatives designed to protect freedom of expression and protest while preserving the autonomy and professionalism of the police and the media; and initiatives to strengthen the protection of equality, especially gender equality, and to reinforce mechanisms for the protection of human rights and the independence of civil society.

At the same time, in order to resist Netanyahu's competitive authoritarian regime and prevent a slide toward full authoritarianism, it is necessary to exploit the system's inherent weakness: the pervasive dysfunction resulting from the formal preservation of democratic institutions alongside their systematic weakening and takeover (such as via appointments based on political loyalty rather than professional qualifications) affects everybody. The opposition should seize this vulnerability and highlight the ensuing functional decline to persuade citizens, including government supporters, that they too are harmed by the continuation of this regime.

In addition, there is a need for vigilance and healthy suspicion toward every single action taken by the government, not only legislative initiatives, and in particular to resist the normalization of authoritarian rhetoric and the erosion of the difference between truth and falsehood. Incendiary rhetoric directed at the judicial and legislative branches, a surge in racist and inflammatory discourse toward minorities, the persecution and weakening of independent media and civil society, the legitimization of discriminatory budget allocations, or the deliberate undermining of public trust in state institutions and their employees - all of these are ingredients of the intimidation tactics of a competitive authoritarian regime that turns against its own citizens in order to concentrate ever-greater power in its hands.

The only way to confront such a regime is to resist this rhetoric of intimidation and its attendant actions in every single arena. This means joining the struggle and steadfast public resistance to the regime revolution in a variety of ways: legal action, participation in demonstrations and Knesset debates, dissemination of information on social media, signing petitions, and any other step that challenges the normalization of the situation promoted by the government.

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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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