

Organizers set up for the demonstration in Tel Aviv on February 3

ANATOMY OF A DEMONSTRATION

Do Tel Aviv protesters have what it takes
to bring down the reign of corruption?

Text and photos by Paul Alster

IT'S EVERYWHERE. On every news broadcast, in every newspaper, on social media, and on the lips of virtually everyone you speak to across the political and social spectrum. It has become such an overwhelming presence in our day-to-day Israeli lives that, sadly, it's now hard to imagine life without it.

I'm talking about seemingly endemic corruption, about rabid cronyism, a rapid moral descent in the political sphere that has snowballed out of control to such an extent that you hear many people wondering, "Why the hell do we stay here?"

The main focus of attention is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, currently facing a raft of serious corruption investigations: the infamous cases 1000, 2000, 3000 and 4000. Be they questions about the alleged improper receiving of luxury gifts from billionaire friends in return for political favors; the alleged attempt to influence media coverage in a major national newspaper; the purchase of German submarines brokered by a close relative of the PM that allegedly wasn't in the best interests of this country; and allegations of false statements being made in relation to Bezeq and the handing out of telecom licenses. The list goes on.

Then there are the ever-present allegations against Sara Netanyahu, and the gutter-level behavior and vile outbursts of their second son, Yair.

And it's not just the prime minister. Other ministers sitting in Bibi's ruling coalition

are being investigated, including the former jailbird Arye Deri of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, invited back to the scene of the crime by Netanyahu to reprise his role as interior minister.

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A slew of current and former mayors of major cities across the country have also been questioned, are about to face trial, or have already been jailed. They include MK David Bitan, a close ally and high-profile advocate of Netanyahu. Until recently, he was chairman of the Likud party, but was forced to step down and is now up to his neck in trouble. During his previous tenure as mayor of Rishon Lezion, Israel's fourth biggest city, Bitan allegedly ensured favorable treatment in valuable building tenders for a powerful Arab mafia boss to whom he reportedly owed large sums of money and was unable to pay off his debts.

Israelis are famous (some say infamous) for their forthright views on just about everything. The worst thing you can say about any Israeli is that he is a "fryer" – a Hebrew

word that basically means a mug who is easily duped – a sucker.

So, in a land where no one wants to be seen as a sucker, those working long, hard hours every day, paying exorbitant taxes, barely managing to pay bills due to the crippling cost of living, those serving in the army, those working in the under-funded health service, surely these good Israelis will rise up and stamp out the descent into rampant corruption and rid themselves of these bad apples. Surely they will, won't they?

Against this backdrop a wave of Saturday night demonstrations have sprung up across the nation. They call for an end to corruption and bribery, a clampdown on the influence of organized crime, and a stop to the attempts by the government to remove powers from the courts and from the investigators who seek to expose fraud and wrongdoing at the highest levels in our society.

They began in early December 2017 in Tel Aviv and quickly spread across the country. Tens of thousands were reported to have attended the first marches that swamped the famous Rothschild Boulevard before making their way to the square outside the Habima Theater. The people were rising up to stop the rot, we were told.

I decided to go see for myself what's going on at these demonstrations. I wanted to feel the passion of a people who don't want to be taken for a ride. I wanted to gauge



whether Netanyahu and others in the highest echelons of power in Israel should be worried about that knock on the door; the same knock on the door, by the way, that greeted former president Moshe Katsav, former prime minister Ehud Olmert, and former Ashkenazi chief rabbi Yona Metzger, among many others, all jailed for offenses ranging from corruption and breach of trust to gross sexual misconduct.

Credit where it's due. This is a country, unlike so many other so-called democracies, which in the very recent past has had both the balls and a sufficiently independent judiciary to jail those at the top of the tree. If the will is there and if the evidence is there, the people have received justice.

I SET off early for Tel Aviv to find a parking space among the anticipated mayhem and was surprised to find that just an hour before the demo was due to begin there was no line for the Habima underground car park. Maybe it's too pricey, I told myself, then saw they have a modest fixed fee for Saturday night parking, so it couldn't be that.

Emerging into the warm night air, I heard a few people taking the opportunity to polish their megaphone skills. A cluster nearby had gathered to unload a van full of banners. It must be early, I told myself. Maybe they're starting later this time. Israelis aren't the best timekeepers in the world, as we know. So I headed off down the lengthy Rothschild Boulevard, one of the most exclusive addresses in the country.

My new plan was to meet up with the crowds that I had been told would proceed down the elegant tree-lined thoroughfare.

Beneath my feet, graffiti reading "Get rid of corruption" was tattooed onto the sidewalk. I walked for around 40 minutes and only saw two people bearing placards heading in the direction of Habima Square. Sure, there were others without placards heading there, but they seemed to be going more for a night out, taking in the action before moving onto other things, certainly not seeking to demand a reset in society.

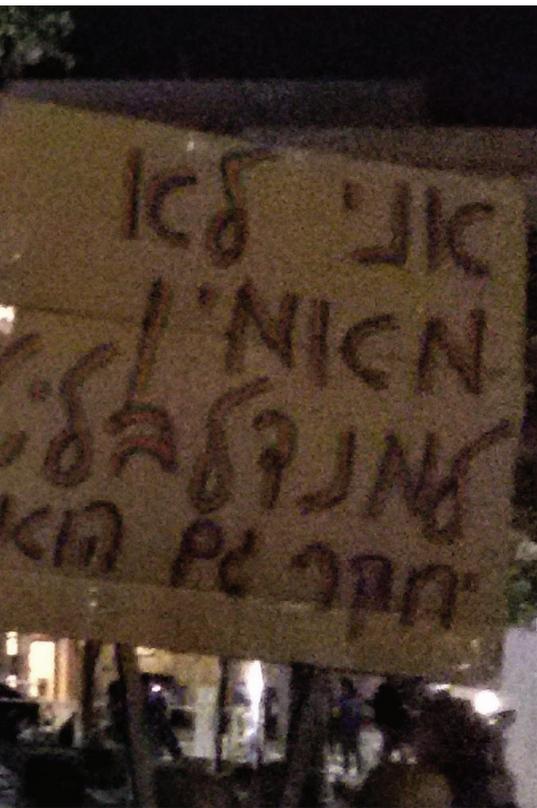
The cafés and restaurants around me were jam-packed with young people drinking skinny lattes, eating designer hamburgers, busy looking cool. Well-dressed

youngsters enjoying the good things in life in this rich part of town. If they were concerned about corruption, bribery, one-third of the population being below the poverty line, the erosion of civil liberties, they certainly weren't showing it.

By the time I arrived back at the square, a crowd of between 1,000-1,500 had gathered. Speeches rang out and were lapped up by a seemingly middle-class crowd with an estimated average age of not less than 50. Good people, no doubt. Genuinely concerned, certainly. But at the very most 1,500 people. Is that all that could be mustered, even allowing for other demos across this land?

"*Busha! Busha! Busha!*" (Shame! Shame! Shame!) rang out time and again from the crowd.

"You took, you were caught, go home," warned Yoram Zellner, a former senior army officer, imploring the prime minister to resign. "Our democracy is under attack as never before. The Supreme Court is under attack and the prime minister is silent. The head of the army is under attack, the president is under attack, the head of the



Protesters demonstrate against what they allege is corruption in all levels of government in Israel

Shabak [Shin Bet] is under attack. The prime minister sees nothing, hears nothing and stays silent.”

“*Busha! Busha! Busha!*” the crowd responded, to the accompaniment of whistles and the banging of drums. “We won’t be silent, we won’t give up, until he resigns!” Zellner concluded.

“We’re not afraid of the mafia,” boomed another speaker. “Those who should be afraid are the prime minister and [Attorney General Avichai] Mandelblit.” Loud applause and cheers from the crowd.

Indeed, as much of the crowd’s anger was directed at the embattled attorney general as at the prime minister himself, many perceiving the former as guilty of dereliction of duty in dithering in the time he is taking to decide whether or not Netanyahu should be charged. Mandelblit, for his part, has long defended himself by insisting he is taking time to consider all the evidence before him.

But while this gathering was doing its very best to imbue a sense of outrage at the current state of affairs, my impression was that these well-intentioned, well-heeled Tel

Avivians (whether you agree with them, or not) don’t really do outrage and fury the way others in Israeli society do outrage and fury so well. As if to demonstrate the point, there was a counter-demonstration directly across the road from Habima Square where just a dozen or so Netanyahu supporters, fenced in by a police cordon that outnumbered them two to one, were making almost as much noise.

“My friend, there’s no one like Bibi,” read one placard in Hebrew.

“They’re calling us fascists, monkeys, but *Am Yisrael* [the Israeli people] are smart,” their speaker said, taunting those just 20 meters away. “We believe in one solution: Expel the left-wingers, expel the Palestinians! We are at war! You are antisemites!”

“Bibi, Bibi, we love you. Oy, oy, oy,” he continued. “The economy is booming and you’re crying. All you doctors, all you hi-tech people. Go home. Oy, oy, oy.”

An elderly lady passed by, looked disdainfully at the man with the megaphone, then caustically shouted, “You’re talking crap!”

BACK AT the main demo, musician Dori Ben-Ze’ev was singing a protest song to the tune of “Yellow Submarine” that seemed to be going down well. But I’d seen enough. It was all quite depressing. As I headed back to my car, a man selling hot snacks at least brought a wry smile to my face as he tried, in vain, to drum up a little business.

“*Bagele*, three for 10 shekels,” he belted. “Not corrupted!”

Whatever Netanyahu has or hasn’t done, one thing is certain: Under his premiership, Israel has become a society more bitterly divided than at any time in its 70-year history. But Netanyahu and his supporters will not lose any sleep over demonstrations such as the one I witnessed. The turnout was poor, and the demonstrators are, with the greatest of respect, too old and too po-

lite to storm the Bastille.

The passion of downtrodden people that severe crises engender has yet to surface in Israel – or at least not in those currently accusing the government of corruption. For as long as the youth of Israel are more bothered about designer clothes and nights out in trendy bars and cafés than marching to defend civil liberties, exposing corruption, and fighting the growing influence of organized crime, nothing will change.

I ask this as a person who is neither right nor left-wing: Where were those young people? Where were the people of color? Where were people wearing a kippa? Where were those who clean our streets, who wash dishes in those trendy and not-so-trendy cafés, who drive our buses? Maybe this apathy is born of disillusion, of a sense of disenfranchisement caused by a warped electoral system; of a sense that just a privileged few now control everything in this society and can do as they wish, and that no amount of screaming, shouting, or marching will make a bit of difference.

Some say, with good reason, that a wide variety of opinion is the sign of a flourishing democracy. Be that as it may, it is the rising level of vitriolic hatred that underscores those opinions across an ever more fractured society, which should be ringing alarm bells in every clear-thinking Israeli head – be it messianic settlers, ultra-left-wing supporters of BDS, Haredim resisting the draft, Arab extremists supporting those who call for Israel’s destruction, left-wing anti-Israel NGOs, right-wingers calling for the forced expulsion of Arabs, and so on.

If this is the body Israel, then, sadly, this is a body that is sick, really sick. And, ominously, there is precious little sign that enough people really care to guarantee it will get well any time soon. ■

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