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The True Face of Israel's Protest Movement



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In a [glowing profile](#), the New York Times recently characterised Israeli particle physicist Dr Shikma Bressler as “the face of Israel’s protests.”

The description could not be more apt. For nearly 30 weeks, Bressler – alongside a few others – has been leading hundreds of thousands of protesters in an effort to stop the judicial overhaul planned by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government.

The level and breadth of the mobilisation are unprecedented and, according to Bressler, the effort is motivated by a deep concern for Israel’s future. “We can either fall into a very dark, extreme, racist place where the Israel that we know, in all its social and economic

aspects, will be destroyed,” she explained to the NYT reporter, “or we can build a new stronger, better democracy for the good of all the people.”

Like most mainstream media outlets, in this recent article, the NYT presents Bressler and the movement she leads as the pinnacle of liberal values. Unfortunately, however, as is often the case with media coverage of developments in Israel, there is more to this story than meets the eye.

For example, on July 3, a just few hours after Israeli soldiers marched into the Jenin refugee camp, killing at least 12 Palestinians and injuring over 100 more, the same Bressler posted a tweet drawing a link between the military incursion and the protests in Tel Aviv.

“In order to continue standing with our heads held high and with all of our hearts against the threats looming from outside; so our heroic children, brothers and partners who are now fighting in Jenin will not be exposed to prosecution at The Hague, we must guarantee that Israel remain a De-mo-cr-acy. The well-being of our soldiers as well as their future and the future of our country are now (also) in the hands of the struggle.”

In many ways, Bressler is spot on: Israel’s Supreme Court has always served as a shield for soldiers invading Palestinian cities from Jenin in the north to Rafah in the south, and the government’s attack on the court could potentially leave soldiers vulnerable to international prosecution in the future. But, of course, these words also invalidate Bressler’s claim that she is fighting for “democracy for the good of all the people”. Well, at least in the eyes of those who consider Palestinians human, too.

Protection against war crime indictments

Protection against war crime indictments became a major theme in the weeks leading up to the July 24 vote on the controversial “reasonable standard” bill—a central piece of legislation aimed at weakening the judiciary. At one point, 1,142 air force reservists, including 235 fighter pilots, 173 drone operators and 85 special forces soldiers, threatened to stop their volunteer military service should the bill pass.

The Israeli media was up in arms, spending vast amounts of time analysing the potential impact of widespread refusal on Israel’s military preparedness, and featuring a long line of generals to underscore the acute dangers of extensive insubordination. A few of the refuseniks were also interviewed on TV, explaining that while they were proud of their military service, they were unwilling to protect a non-democratic regime.

The subtext was clear. Israeli pilots are willing to continue dropping lethal bombs on Gaza’s crowded cities and refugee camps, but, echoing Bressler, they, too, find it difficult

to trust the government and with the judicial overhaul, they are afraid they might end up being accused of war crimes in The Hague. In other words, they believe with this judiciary overhaul, the government is abdicating its responsibility to protect Jewish citizens and the privileges bestowed upon them.

Deepening apartheid

The refusenik threats did not immediately succeed in stopping the legislation, and on July 25 the government passed the “reasonable standard” bill. The very next day, the Knesset passed an extension to the Admissions Committees Law but since this bill was much less controversial it received almost no media attention in the West.

The original Admissions Committees Law was enacted in 2010 to circumvent a High Court of Justice ruling that prohibited cooperative communities from leasing land exclusively to Jews. While the 2010 law allowed only communities of up to 400 families residing in the Negev or Galilee to refuse to admit Palestinian citizens of Israel into their settlement, the new bill raises the bar so that communities of up to 700 families in any part of Israel can ban Palestinian citizens from purchasing a plot.

And here is the crux of the issue: this law received the support of parliamentarians on both sides of the aisle, namely those who in the eyes of Bressler and the Israeli pilots are attacking Israeli democracy and those who are defending it. Indeed, out of 110 Jewish Knesset members (the remaining 10 are Palestinians), only two voted against this law.

Immediately after the bill passed, 20 local leaders from across the political spectrum – ranging from the directors of the Kibbutzim and Moshavim Movements to heads of regional and local councils – posted an infographic thanking Orit Strook, who is among the leaders of the Jewish settlement in Hebron and the current Minister of Settlements and National Missions, for passing the law. Addressing Strook and a number of other Knesset Members, they dispatched the following message:

“During a period of division and disputes, we witnessed a rare moment of unity around one of the basic values of Zionism: settlement. Ministers and Members of Knesset from the right and the left joined together to pass the amendment to the Admissions Committees Law, which will allow the expansion of settlements in the periphery, the absorption of young people and the strengthening of communities.”

There is, in other words, a broad consensus among both those who are for and those against the judicial overhaul about the importance of deepening apartheid. And that is what unites Jewish Israelis despite the current political impasse.

Breaking the consensus

Even as the protesters believe their “home” is being destroyed, the racism of liberal Zionism runs so deep that Bressler can describe her wish for a “democracy for the good of all the people” and yet completely elide Palestinians from this vision. It is also this racism that is destroying the possibility of any truly democratic entity from emerging.

Currently, about half of Israel’s Jewish citizenry are in favour of the judicial overhaul and the other half are against it, suggesting that the only way those resisting the current government have a chance of winning is by creating an alliance with Palestinians who, after all, comprise 20 percent of the country’s citizenry. But since such an alliance would involve abandoning the Zionists’ worldview and the privileges that come with it, the majority of protesters, including Shikma Bressler, are unwilling to even contemplate it. Thus, while theoretically there is a path leading to the establishment of a democratic polity in Israel/Palestine, the current protest movement is a very far cry from making this a reality.

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