

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Al Jazeera

Israelis protest against high cost of living

Hundreds of thousands pour into streets of Tel Aviv and other major cities to push the government for reforms.

8/6/2011

Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets of Tel Aviv and other major Israeli cities to protest against the increasing cost of living, in a big show of force by a movement that is sweeping the country.

About 300,000 mostly middle-class Israelis marched through the streets in central Tel Aviv on Saturday evening, waving flags, beating drums and chanting: "The people demand social justice".

Some held signs reading, "People before profits", "Rent is not a luxury" and "Israel is too dear".

The protests seemed to far eclipse any previous demonstrations over social issues in the history of the country.

In Jerusalem, 20,000 protesters marched toward the residence of Binyamin Netanyahu's, Israel's prime minister.

Sizeable demonstrations occurred throughout the country, including 5,000 people in Modi'in, 3,000 in Kiryat Shmona, 1,000 in Hod Hasharon, 1,000 in Eilat, more than 500 in Ashkelon and 200 in Dimona.

Israeli media showed streets packed with people on Saturday night. A similar protest last

weekend drew an estimated crowd of 150,000 nationwide.

Many observers viewed Saturday night's protest as a test to see if the movement was gaining momentum or fizzling out.

Protesters paid homage to the uprisings taking place across the Arab world, waving banners reading "This is Egypt" and making reference to Cairo's Tahrir Square, where Egyptian protesters gathered during their uprising.

Demonstrations began in mid-July with a few tents set up in an expensive part of central Tel Aviv to protest real estate prices.

They quickly spread and tent encampments have sprouted up in other city centres, proving a serious challenge to Netanyahu's coalition government.

Wide range of issues

The movement further expanded as many groups later joined in over a wide range of economic issues.

"This started out as a housing crisis when a young woman was evicted from her flat when she couldn't afford her rent," Ron Kampeas, Washington bureau chief at the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, told Al Jazeera. "But it's ballooned and encompasses much more than that now."

"There was planned privatisation of what was once a socialist economy, and there weren't adequate plans to bring along the middle classes and lower-middle classes, as a new wealthy class arose in Israel."

Young parents are protesting high child-rearing bills, doctors are striking due to strenuous work conditions, teachers are marching over restrictive work contracts and others are in the streets over low salaries, ever-increasing gas prices and food costs.

The popular movement has snowballed into the biggest internal threat yet for the right-leaning government. Polls released last week show Netanyahu's approval ratings have dropped, while support for the protesters is very high.

Netanyahu has announced a series of bureaucratic reforms, including freeing up land for construction and offering tax breaks.

"The prime minister believes strongly that [protesters'] claims are valid, that we have artificially high prices that are there predominantly because of monopolistic practice and cartels," Mark Regev, Netanyahu's spokesman, said as marchers were chanting their demands.

"The government hopes to push through a series of reforms that will bring down the prices that Israeli consumers pay."

But the reforms thus far have only increased anger in the streets, with protesters complaining the measures would have no real affect on them.

"The prime minister hasn't told us anything," Stav Shafir, one of the protest leaders, said.

"We are going to keep protesting, we want solutions, we want real willingness by the government to work with the people and answer our demands, until then we will be here."

Roni Sofer, an aide to Netanyahu, said, "[The PM] understands the severity of the problems and believes there are serious solutions, but actions need to be taken responsibly".

Sofer said Netanyahu is appointing a team of ministers on Sunday "to provide a working plan by September".

High poverty rate

Israel has one of the highest poverty rates and income gaps in the developed world, and prices for homes, food and fuel have risen in recent months.

For middle-class Israelis, the high cost of living makes owning property impractical if not virtually impossible, and causes many working Israelis to live in debt from paycheck to paycheck.

"This [movement] really is reaching across Israeli society," Al Jazeera's Cal Perry said, reporting from the tent city in central Tel Aviv. "What people will tell you is that the middle class is slowly disappearing."

"The prime minister has formed a committee to take a look at what exactly the protesters want. The president said a few days ago that these are legitimate demands that the protesters have ... And it's going to take a financial burden on this country."

The average Israeli salary is about \$2,500 per month while teachers and social workers typically earn less than \$2,000 per month.

Rent on a modest three bedroom apartment in central Jerusalem can cost upward of \$1,500 per month and more in Tel Aviv.

A standard, 100-square-metre apartment can easily top \$600,000 in modest middle-class neighborhoods in metropolitan centres like Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and \$200,000 to \$300,000 in second-tier areas.

Critics have pointed out that the young protest leaders appear unfocused and unorganised, but this past week their leaders consolidated and spelled out their demands.

The list of demands includes affordable housing, reduction of high Value Added Tax rates, free day care for children, increased salaries for health care workers and other social benefits.

