



## Military draft dispute shakes Israel coalition



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By [Allyn Fisher-Ilan](#)

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - A dispute over military draft exemptions exposed cracks in Israel's ruling coalition on Monday, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed a panel charged with drafting reforms of the law on the emotive issue.

Vice Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz, head of coalition partner Kadima, threatened to end their two-month-old alliance unless Netanyahu pushed for reforms to make more ultra-Orthodox Israelis and Arab citizens eligible for military or national service.

Mofaz's outburst at a party meeting followed an announcement by Netanyahu earlier in the day that a panel headed by a Kadima member, charged with drafting proposals for conscription reform, had been "for all intents and purposes ... disbanded."

Netanyahu is also under attack from his other coalition partners, ultra-Orthodox parties who have threatened to quit if he does pursue reforms that would make their followers do military service. Netanyahu has cautiously supported the reform.

The row set the stage for a month of heated debate before a deadline next month for a new law to replace the 2002 "Tal Law" that exempts ultra-Orthodox communities from military service.

The High Court ruled in February that the "Tal Law" was unconstitutional and would expire on August 1.

Kadima joined Netanyahu's right-wing dominated government in May, helping it to avoid an early election, precisely because it promised to reform the conscription laws.

Military service is a highly emotive issue for Israelis as most 18-year-olds face compulsory conscription.

Many Israelis are angry that thousands of ultra-Orthodox citizens are exempted from military service every year to pursue religious study. Some have complained that most Israeli Arab citizens are also exempt from military duty.

Israeli Arabs comprise about a fifth of the population, and many oppose any attempt to make them do military service, though some join the army voluntarily. Many are related to Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories and neighboring Arab countries.

#### 'HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY' CITED

The head of the disbanded panel, Kadima lawmaker Yochanan Plessner, said he would go ahead and issue the panel's recommendations in the coming days, saying this was "an historic opportunity" for reform.

An ultranationalist on Plessner's committee resigned last week in protest at what he saw as a lack of determination to draft more Arabs into the military.

Some of Netanyahu's traditional religious allies have threatened to resign over efforts to force their constituents to join the military.

"We are incensed. Seminary students should be permitted to continue studying Torah," said Moshe Gafny of the Torah Judaism Party, using the Hebrew name for holy Jewish scriptures.

Netanyahu, in his statement, said disbanding the panel "does not obviate our responsibility to deal with the issue of equality in bearing the burden (of military service)" and urged Mofaz to join him in finding a solution.

Kadima is Israel's largest political party and the biggest in Netanyahu's government, with 28 lawmakers in the 120-member parliament.

Netanyahu's own Likud party has 27 seats, and 16 seats are held by religious parties in the coalition that are opposed to conscription reform.

(Created by Allyn Fisher-Ilan, editing by Tim Pearce)