

Thursday, 6 June 2013

Steeped in tradition, Israel's ultra-Orthodox face reform drive



A small rock lies on the desk of Dov Lipman. It was hurled at the member of parliament by a fellow ultra-Orthodox Jew and is a constant reminder of the deep divisions within Israel that Lipman says must be overcome. Lipman, who is a rabbi, was hit by the stone shortly after immigrating to Israel from the United States, eight years ago, when he stumbled into a riot over plans to dig up some ancient bones - something the protesters said was a desecration. "We have returned to this land after 2,000 years and we have to get this right; and it is not right," said Lipman, a member of the Yesh Atid (There is a Future) party that wants Israel's large ultra-Orthodox communities pushed into mainstream society. An integral part of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling coalition, Yesh Atid is leading an unprecedented, multi-pronged charge, backed by legislation that seeks to draw more ultra-Orthodox men into the conscript army, trim their welfare benefits and reform their antiquated, religious schooling. For many 'Haredim' - a Hebrew term meaning 'those who tremble before God' - the government is doing too much too quickly. Even some coalition partners have their doubts, fearing a backlash from the volatile fringe of a disparate movement born in the impoverished villages of 18th-century eastern Europe. The Haredim make up 10 percent of Israel's eight million population and they are expanding rapidly, with families of 10 children not uncommon. Few of them share Lipman's world vision. Often living in de-facto ghettos of their own making, the majority of Haredi men are allowed to shun the army and dedicate their life to religious study, living off donations, state benefits and the often meager wages of wives, many of whom work. In a country where most 18-year-old Jewish men and women are conscripted, to maintain a standing and reserve army over 600,000 strong, such treatment is causing growing resentment - something Yesh Atid successfully tapped into at an election in January, helping it become the second largest party in Israel. As a result, Haredim parties were cast into opposition for only the second time since 1977, leaving angry ultra-Orthodox to warn that the rule of law cannot trump the rabbis' word. "We'll go to jail. Don't put us to the test," said Yechezkel, a 30-year-old, full-time seminary student, wearing the traditional heavy black garb that many Haredi men don, in defiance of the sun burning the Jerusalem street around him. Growing army Ultra-Orthodox men poured onto the streets of Jerusalem last month to protest against government plans, hurling stones at police at the start of what could become a long, hot summer. "It's a joke. They founded a state 65 years ago and they want to reform people who keep a thousand-year-old tradition," said Yechezkel, contrasting the devout to the secular Zionists who founded the Jewish state but kept religion at arm's length. He declined to give his family name. As he spoke, a passerby shouted that it was blasphemy to even talk to reporters at all. Studying the Jewish scriptures, the Torah and Talmud, is one of the most important edicts for the Haredim, whose heroes and role models are rabbis and scholars who stood against religious changes that reached Jewish communities with the industrial age. However, ultra-Orthodox moderates such as Lipman deny that study should exclude all else, pointing to the United States where Haredim have full-time jobs - including his father who was a judge and whose old gavel sits on his desk besides the stone. In a country that feels under siege, with a 20-percent Arab minority and Jews themselves drawn from very diverse immigrant groups, the separateness of the Haredim has come to seem a major obstacle to Israel's national cohesion as their numbers swell. When the state was created in 1948, its first prime minister, the Polish-born socialist David Ben-Gurion, exempted about 400 students from military service so they could devote themselves to religious study, hoping to keep alive sacred knowledge and traditions almost wiped out in the Holocaust. Fast forward 65 years, and the number of full-time seminary students has swelled to about 60,000, across a wide age range. Demographics suggest their ranks will expand much faster in the decades to come, with an estimated 32 percent of all Jewish