

Israeli religious legislation angers U.S. Jewish groups

ERUSALEM (AP) — A contingent of Reform and Conservative Jews, mostly from the United States, lobbied the Knesset on Monday against legislation that would deny them legal recognition in Israel. A top government official accused them of trying to bring down the government.

With support from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's legislature is preparing to pass a bill that would give Orthodox Jews a monopoly on religious matters in Israel. The issue is political dynamite in Israel and has put Netanyahu's government on a collision course with American Jewry, which is dominated by Reform and Conservative movements. American Jews are among the most generous donors to Israel and provide crucial political backing in Washington.

"I'm a second-class Jew in the Jewish state," Rabbi Gerald Weider of New York City said as he and some 20 other Reform leaders wandered the Knesset halls, lobbying against a plan that effectively denies the non-Orthodox a place on councils that oversee religious services.

The legislation is to be presented Tuesday by religious parties in Netanyahu's coalition government. Another bill opposed by Reform Jews, making non-Orthodox conversions illegitimate, is pending. Orthodox religious parties control a third of Netanyahu's coalition and have vowed to topple the government unless the prime minister follows through on a promise to pass the legislation.

It is the climax of a longstanding dispute between the Orthodox stream of Judaism, which adheres to a rigid interpretation of Jewish law, and the more liberal Conservative and Reform movements, which want to adjust Judaism to modernity — allowing women rabbis, for example.

These movements have been waging a court battle to force the state to grant them greater recognition. Several cases on conversion are scheduled to come before the Supreme Court, which is liberal and widely expected to rule in their favor. To head this off, the Orthodox have demanded immediate passage of the conversion bill, which passed the first of two required readings in June.

American Jewish leaders — and many Israelis — are warning passage of the bill would bring about a historic split between Israel and the Jewish diaspora. Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, head of the Reform Zionist Association in New York, warned of "a catastrophic rift in the Jewish people" and said Netanyahu must choose between the "unity of his coalition and the unity of Judaism."

Netanyahu — who lived much of his life in the United States and has close ties to the U.S. Jewish community — appears sensitive to the dangers. In July, he set up a committee headed by Finance Minister Yaacov Neeman, bringing leaders from all the streams together in search of a compromise.

After arriving in Israel on Sunday, the American contingent met with Netanyahu, who asked them to allow time for Neeman's committee to reach a compromise. Neeman reportedly is proposing the establishment of a "conversion institute," where all the movements would work together but the Orthodox would have effective veto power.

On Monday, however, the leaders of the Reform movement announced they were rejecting the compromise and would forge ahead with the court cases. Netanyahu adviser David Bar-Ilan said the decision was aimed at toppling the Netanyahu government. "There is no doubt that they are doing it — since they are affiliated with the opposition — to bring down the government," he told the Associated Press.

Rabbi Ehud Bandel, a leader of the Conservative movement in Israel, called the accusations "paranoid and untrue."

The dispute between Orthodox and the more liberal movements centers on the interpretation of Jewish law. The Orthodox argue only a rigid set of laws has enabled the Jewish people to survive. "Judaism was handed down to Moses and it was followed by our fathers for 2,000 years. Now they come along wanting to change everything," Aryeh Deri, a leading Orthodox lawmaker, said Monday.

In Israel, the state has ceded certain powers — primarily marriage and divorce — to an Orthodox rabbinate. Even though a majority of Israelis are secular, most are nonetheless married by Orthodox rabbis, and even if they attend services rarely, it is usually in an Orthodox synagogue.

The Reform and Conservative movements are allowed to practice in Israel, but marriages or conversions to Judaism carried out by their rabbis are not recognized by the state. Abe Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, called on Netanyahu to allow members of his Likud Party to vote of conscience on the conversion bill.

"Even though the law itself will do very little to change things, the fact is that it is perceived as Israelis not accepting diaspora Jews at a level of equality," Foxman, of New York City, said. "Psychologically, it is a very painful development."



Netanyahu

Chinese government angered by release of anti-Communist films

Ministry orders studios to limit activity in trade fair

SHANGHAI, China (AP) — For Hollywood studios keen on cracking the China market, the Shanghai film festival offered a good opportunity for deal-making. That is, until the Chinese government got involved.

Executives from Disney and other studios were kept to the sidelines as China's largest film trade fair opened Monday. MGM sent no representatives. The reticence, at least in part, is said to have been motivated by Chinese government anger.

China's Ministry of Radio, Film and Television has ordered the studios to limit their public activities in a fit of pique over three movies depicting Beijing's harsh rule in Tibet and its arbitrary legal system, sources in the state-run film industry said on condition of anonymity.

The images of Communist Party oppression in Sony's *Seven Years in Tibet*, MGM's *Red Corner* and yet-to-be released *Kundun* on Disney are the type of negative publicity Chinese President Jiang Zemin hopes to dispel on his current eight-day tour of the United States.

But the predicament the Hollywood studios are in illustrates the pitfalls of doing business in China. Free market forces have not fully supplanted state controls, and the government has shown a willingness to sacrifice economic gain for political goals.

The Chinese government has signaled to the studios, especially Disney, that the movies might harm their business interests in China. A year ago, Chinese officials were said to have privately expressed their displeasure with Disney's plans to release *Kundun* — a film directed by Martin Scorsese that deals with the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of Tibet. Concern arose in Hollywood Beijing would use Disney's expansion dreams to force the company to distance itself from the project.

Beijing's view is the Dalai Lama wants to split Tibet from China, which annexed the Himalayan region in 1951. China's Foreign Ministry has said any praise for the Dalai Lama "is counter to the facts."

Seven Years in Tibet, starring Brad Pitt, tells the story of an Austrian explorer's friendship with the young Dalai Lama. *Red Corner*, about an American lawyer accused of murder in China, stars Richard Gere, an open supporter of Tibetan autonomy.

Beijing limits imports of foreign films to about one a month, and censors have not approved any by Disney or Sony for release this year. By contrast, 20th Century Fox has received approval for two releases. The Chinese film industry sources said the government's order, conveyed to studio representatives two weeks ago, demanded the companies withdraw from public activities for a period of time. It did not order any offices in China be closed or deals canceled, and it was unclear whether it specifically mentioned the Shanghai International Film Festival and its concurrent three-day film market.

A spokesman for the ministry, who identified himself only as Mr. Cao, refused to answer questions about the order. The tiff between Beijing and Hollywood made the festival's official organizers uncomfortable. Chen Xiaomeng, director of the festival office, said the studios stayed away on their own accord.



Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer (Brad Pitt) meets a young Dalai Lama (Jamyang Wangchuk) for the first time in TriStar Pictures' *Seven Years in Tibet*. The film and others have angered the Chinese government due to their negative portrayals of Chinese communist rule.

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