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Netanyahu: Rotem's conversion bill won't reach Knesset plenum

Sharansky: Many feel they will be harmed by bill

• By JONAH MANDEL

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said on Monday that Israel Beiteinu MK David Rotem's conversion bill would not reach the Knesset's floor for a vote.

The prime minister made the statement in response to criticism of the measure from Kadima MK Shlomo Molla.

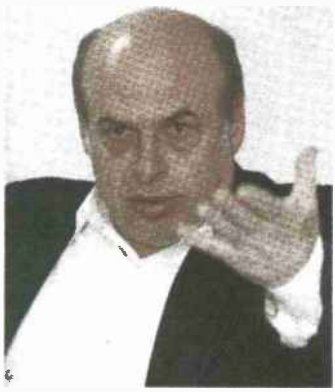
Netanyahu also met with Jewish Agency chairman Natan Sharansky on the topic, after Sharansky received assurances from Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin that the bill would not be voted on in the coming week.

Earlier on Monday, the Knesset's Law Committee approved Rotem's bill for a first reading.

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Five MKs – from Israel Beit-einu, United Torah Judaism and Shas – supported the legislation, while four from Kadima, Labor and Hadash opposed it. The three Likud committee members were absent from the heated discussion and the ensuing vote.

The bill must now pass three readings in the plenum to become law.



NATAN SHARANSKY
(Ariel Jerozolimski)

Kadima lawmakers have slammed the legislation as having the potential to give haredim a monopoly over conversions, and said the bill would not ease the conversion process in any way.

Attending the Law Committee meeting were Sharansky and Jerry Silverman, president of the Jewish Federations of North America, who expressed hope following the vote that "the prime minister and the Likud will not allow such a bill to pass, as it would create a significant rift between Israel and world Jewry."

Silverman also noted the

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new language in Rotem's bill following recent modifications, according to which special conversion courts and city rabbis would be able to conduct conversions, "so long as they are properly done, after accepting Torah and *mitzvot* as per Halacha."

"This is very problematic for world Jewry; we don't need this divisiveness," Silverman said, while at the same time stressing that "even though the bill ignores Diaspora Jewry," their support of Israel would not be conditioned on the fate of Rotem's legislation.

Sharansky expressed deep disappointment over the bill passing the committee.

"We cannot divide the Jewish people with legislation which many in the Jewish world view as defining them as second-class Jews," he said. "Jews abroad are the most loyal supporters of Israel, and stand at the forefront of the fight for Israel's image around the world."

"The proposed bill was supposed to have been discussed in detail with world Jewry," continued Sharansky, who was appointed by Netanyahu to lead that dialogue. "I hope the prime minister will send a clear message that this proposed legislation will not move forward without proper discussion and consultation with all those who feel they may be harmed by it."

Beyond the changes Rotem made to the bill's draft ahead of Monday's discussion, he also removed its third clause, which stated that the Citizenship Law would not apply to anyone who was not entitled to an *oleh* status prior to their entry to Israel.

Rotem reiterated to *The Jerusalem Post* that his bill would have no bearing on conversions taking place abroad; rather, he said, it deals with the problems regarding conversion within Israel that can be remedied by allowing city rabbis to conduct conversions.

"I am not seeking to alter the procedures of conversion to make it easier, but to expand the options for conversion, without breaking the boundaries of Halacha," the Orthodox lawmaker said.

"The bill is a revolution that will ease the process and prevent retroactive conversion cancellations," he added.

When asked about the understandings that such legislation would only come after a dialogue with all streams of Judaism, led by Sharansky at Netanyahu's behest, Rotem said that he had already told Jewish leaders in the US that he wouldn't let anything hold back his advancement of the legislation.

"I can't put off solving the problem of hundreds of thousands of people," he said in reference to immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are not Jews by Halacha.

The Masorti (Conservative) movement in Israel slammed the bill, which would allow only Orthodox conversions, and issued an urgent letter to President Shimon Peres on Monday afternoon asking him to act to prevent the "impending rift" between Israel and US Jewry.