

Lawmaker pulls bid to give rabbis control of Israeli electricity

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December 20, 2011

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JERUSALEM (RNS) An Israeli lawmaker succumbed to public pressure and scrapped legislation that would have given religious officials a say in how the country's electricity is produced and distributed.

Uzi Landau, minister of national infrastructure, on Sunday (Dec. 18) withdrew what was called the "kosher electricity bill," an amendment to an existing law that would have empowered Israel's chief rabbis to supervise power production.

Landau drafted the amendment in response to the growing number of ultra-Orthodox Jews who go off the national electricity grid, fearing that the power is produced in violation of Jewish law by, for example, employing Jews on the Sabbath.

Some ultra-Orthodox Jews are now using private generators and other power sources, some of them of questionable safety. Rabbinical supervision would have cost consumers millions of dollars, according to opponents of the amendment.

Landau withdrew the amendment soon after activists held a demonstration outside the minister's home, circulated a petition and started a Facebook page to protest what they see as the increasing influence of the ultra-Orthodox on Israeli life.

"Above all, the aim of the bill is to avoid the danger to human life that arises from the use of pirate electricity," Landau said in a statement. "I do not rule out the

possibility that it may be that the way that the bill was drafted lent it to too far-reaching an interpretation, which would have upset the status quo, and we intend to examine this and to amend it."