

Israel

Israel on brink of 'constitutional collapse', president warns

Isaac Herzog urges hardline government to delay contested judicial shake-up



Israeli president Isaac Herzog: 'I feel — we all feel — that we are barely a moment before a clash, even a violent clash' © Virginia Mayo/AP

James Shotter in Jerusalem YESTERDAY

Israel's president has appealed to the hardline new government to delay a contested judicial overhaul, warning that mounting political polarisation had left the country "on the brink of constitutional and social collapse".

In a primetime address on Sunday night, Isaac Herzog urged the new administration, headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to seek a compromise with its political opponents over the judicial reform, warning that "we will all lose, the state of Israel will lose", if no consensus was reached.

"I feel — we all feel — that we are barely a moment before a clash, even a violent clash," Herzog said in his speech, which was delivered the evening before [Israel's](#) parliament is due to begin voting on the overhaul.

"We are no longer in a political debate but on the brink of constitutional and social collapse."

Since taking office late last year, Netanyahu's government, which unites his Likud party with an array of ultrareligious and ultranationalist groups and is widely regarded as the most rightwing in Israeli history, has made [overhauling the judiciary](#) one of its main priorities.

Proponents argue the changes — which will give the government control over the appointment of judges and all but eliminate the top court’s ability to strike down legislation — are needed to rein in a judiciary that has used powers it was never formally granted to push a partisan, leftwing agenda.

But critics of the plan, who include numerous serving and former judicial officials, the opposition, former central bank chiefs, and [executives from Israel’s crucial tech sector](#), have warned it will fatally undermine Israel’s checks and balances, allow minority protections to be eviscerated, and damage Israel’s business climate.

In recent weeks, tens of thousands of Israelis have [taken to the streets](#) to protest, with more than 100,000 people joining the largest demonstrations in Tel Aviv, the country’s liberal bastion. Another protest is due outside the Knesset in Jerusalem on Monday as it begins to vote on the first part of the overhaul.

In his speech on Sunday night, Herzog — a national figurehead whose powers are largely ceremonial — acknowledged that aspects of the judiciary were in need of reform, and that “changes can be completely legitimate”.

But he warned that, in their current form, the proposals put forward by the government had sparked deep concerns over “potential harm to the state of Israel’s democratic institutions”.

To defuse the crisis, Herzog called for talks between the government and its opponents, based on five principles, including a new framework for the legislative process, a clearer delineation of the top court’s powers, and a process for appointing judges in which neither the government nor the judiciary automatically had a decisive say.

Netanyahu did not immediately respond to Herzog’s speech but other members of Likud dismissed the call for compromise.

“Hypocrisy is the name of the game and we have long since finished participating in it,” communications minister Shlomo Karhi wrote on Twitter. “Continue with the reforms with all our might.”

Opposition politicians welcomed Herzog’s intervention. Yair Lapid, who heads the largest opposition party, Yesh Atid, said the president’s proposals were a reasonable framework for discussion. He called for the government’s overhaul to be “immediately suspended” as a precondition for talks.

“... ..”

“Until then, the struggle will continue, the protests will not stop,” he wrote on Twitter. “We are fighting for the values of the Declaration of Independence, and for the very idea of living here together as one people.”

Separately, Israel’s security cabinet said on Sunday night that it would give formal recognition to nine settler outposts in the occupied West Bank and that officials would approve further construction in existing settlements. It was the first such move since the new government took office.

Most of the international community considers the settlements illegal. Officials from Israel’s key ally, the US, have previously warned against such moves.



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