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### Israeli democracy is fighting for its life

As the Netanyahu government aims to neutralise the Supreme Court, the future of the country is on the line

**YUVAL NOAH HARARI**



Demonstrators take part in a multi-day march from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in protest against the judicial overhaul bill. Some fear the country may be days away from civil war © Menahem Kahana/AFP/Getty Images

**Yuval Noah Harari** JULY 23 2023

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To understand events in Israel, there is just one question to ask: what limits the power of the government? Robust democracies rely on a whole system of checks and balances. But Israel lacks a constitution, an upper house in the parliament, a federal structure or any other check on government power except one — the Supreme Court. This Monday, the Netanyahu government plans to pass the first in a series of laws that will neutralise the Supreme Court. If it succeeds, it will gain unlimited power.

Members of the Netanyahu coalition have already disclosed their intention to pass laws and pursue policies that will discriminate against Arab people, women, LGBTQ people and secular people. Once the Supreme Court is out of the way, nothing will remain to stop them. In such a situation, the government could also rig future elections, for example by banning Arab parties from participating — a step previously proposed by coalition members. Israel will still hold elections but these will become an authoritarian ritual rather than a free democratic contest.

Government members openly brag about their intentions. They explain that since they won Israel's last elections, it means they can now do anything they want. Like other authoritarian forces, the Israeli government doesn't understand what democracy means. It thinks it is a dictatorship of the majority, and that those who win democratic elections are thereby granted unlimited power. In recent months I have talked with many Netanyahu supporters, and they genuinely believe that any restraint on an elected government is undemocratic. "What do you mean we cannot take away people's basic liberties?" they say. "But we won the elections! That means we can do anything we want!" In fact, democracy means freedom and equality for all. Democracy is a system that guarantees all people certain liberties, which even the majority cannot take away.

The establishment of a dictatorship in Israel would have grave consequences not only for Israeli citizens. The ruling coalition is led by messianic religious zealots who believe in an ideology of Jewish supremacy. This calls to annex the occupied Palestinian territories to Israel without granting citizenship to the Palestinians, and ultimately dreams of destroying the al-Aqsa mosque compound — one of Islam's holiest sites — and building a new Jewish temple in its stead.

Jewish supremacy is not a fringe notion. It is represented in the coalition by the Jewish Power party and the Religious Zionism party. Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich (from the latter) has recently called to [wipe out an entire Palestinian town](#) in retaliation for the killing of two Jewish settlers.

Men like Smotrich now command one of the most formidable military machines in the world, armed with nuclear and advanced cyber weapons. For decades the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has waged a campaign to stop Iran from going nuclear, warning the world about the dangers posed by a fundamentalist regime with nuclear capabilities. Now Netanyahu is establishing exactly such a regime in Israel. This could set fire to the entire Middle East, with consequences that will reverberate far beyond the region. It would be incredibly stupid of Israel to do something like that, but as we learnt from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we should never underestimate human stupidity. It is one of the most powerful forces in history.

The good news is that in recent months a powerful resistance movement has emerged to save Israeli democracy. Rejecting the ideology of Jewish supremacy, and connecting to ancient traditions of Jewish tolerance, hundreds of thousands of Israelis are demonstrating, protesting and resisting in every nonviolent way we know. Since Friday, more than 10,000 army reservists — including hundreds of air force pilots, cyber warfare experts, and commanders of elite units — have publicly declared that they will not serve a dictatorship, and that they will therefore suspend their service if the judiciary overhaul continues. By this Tuesday, the famed Israeli air force — which relies to a large extent on reservists — may be partially grounded.

To appreciate the magnitude of this step, it should be recalled that military service is a sacred duty for many Israelis. In a country that emerged from the ashes of the Holocaust, and that has faced existential threats for decades, the army has always been off-limits in political controversies. This is no longer the case. Former chiefs of the Israeli army, air force and security services have publicly called on soldiers to stop serving. Veterans of Israel's many wars are saying this is the most important struggle of their lives. The Netanyahu government tries to depict this as a military coup, but it is the exact opposite. Israeli soldiers aren't taking up arms to oppose the government — they are laying them down. They explain that their contract is with the Israeli democracy, and once democracy expires — so does their contract.

The feeling that the social contract has been broken has also led universities, labour unions, high-tech companies and other private businesses to threaten more strikes if the government continues with its antidemocratic power-grab. Israelis understand the potential damage to our country. As the so-called Start-Up Nation is closing down, investors around the world are pulling money out. The internal damage is even greater. Fear and hatred now dominate relations between different sections of society, as the social contract is ripped to shreds. Government members call the demonstrators and army reservists “traitors”, and demand that force be used to crush the opposition. Israelis worry that we might be days away from civil war.

But the hundreds of thousands of us protesting in the streets feel we have no choice. It is our duty to ourselves, to Jewish tradition and to humanity to prevent the rise of a Jewish supremacist dictatorship. We are standing in the streets, because we cannot do otherwise if we are to save Israeli democracy.

**Letter in response to this article:**

*[Israeli government fails to find judicial balance](#) / [From Raphael Levy, Borehamwood, Hertfordshire, UK](#)*