Waving flags, tens of thousands rally against Israeli govt

AFP

Tens of thousands of protesters waving Israeli flags and chanting slogans against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government rallied in Tel Aviv Saturday, demanding new elections and the return of hostages held in Gaza.

Large protests have occurred in the Israeli city on a weekly basis over Netanyahu's handling of the nearly nine-month-old war in Gaza started by Hamas's October 7 attack on southern Israel.

Many protesters held signs reading "Crime Minister" and "Stop the War" as people poured into the biggest Israeli city's main thoroughfare.

"I am here because I am afraid of the future of my grandchild. There will be no future for them if we don't go out and get rid of the horrible government," said 66-year-old contractor Shai Erel.

"All of the rats in the Knesset… I wouldn't let any one of them be a guard of a kindergarten."

Anti-government protest organisation Hofshi Israel estimated more than 150,000 people attended the rally, calling it the biggest since the Gaza war began.

Some demonstrators lay on the ground covered in red paint in the city's Democracy Square to protest what they say is the death of the country's democracy under Netanyahu.

In an address to the crowd, a former head of Israel's domestic

Shin Bet security agency, Yuval Diskin, condemned Netanyahu as Israel’s “worst prime minister”.

Many are frustrated with the country’s right-wing coalition, which includes Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and other far-right ultra-nationalists, accusing it of prolonging the war in Gaza and putting the country’s security and hostages at risk.

Yoram, a 50-year-old tour guide who declined to give his last name, said he was attending every weekly protest as Israel needed elections “yesterday” because of Netanyahu.

“I really hope that the government collapses,” he said. “If we go to the original date of elections in 2026, it is not going to be a democratic election.”

Hamas militants seized 251 hostages on October 7, of whom Israel believes 116 remain in Gaza, including 41 who the army says are dead.

A separate Tel Aviv rally on Saturday night drew thousands of relatives and supporters of the hostages.

The attack on Israel resulted in the deaths of 1,194 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on Israeli official figures.

Israel’s retaliatory offensive in Gaza has killed at least 37,551 people, also mostly civilians, according to the health ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory.