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New top justice urges judges to explain the job

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PHOENIX - Arizona's judges need to do a better job of explaining what they do or they'll risk losing their independence, the new chief justice of the state Supreme Court said Friday.

Ruth McGregor said one reason there are attacks on the independence of the judiciary is that the public - and even state legislators - do not fully understand what the court system does.

Most recently, she said, that manifested itself in a proposal to give state senators veto power over new judges of the Arizona Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals.

That effort stalled. But McGregor, who took the oath of office Friday, said that won't be the last attack.

"We know that we can deliver justice only if our judges are able to make independent judicial decisions, free from political and special-interest pressure," McGregor said.

"If the judicial branch is not well or fully understood - and it is not by many - then we need to ask ourselves what we need to do to change the way that we communicate about the courts," she said. "And then we need to go about making those changes."

The justices already have taken one step, retaining a public relations firm to help get that message out. Part of the reason deals with restraints on what judges can do.

"We can't go out and campaign," said McGregor. "But we can go out and talk about the system and the things that we're doing. I think we haven't done a very good job with that."

Much of the legislation to revamp the court system stems from arguments of public accountability.

Once judges are appointed - especially at the appellate level - they can pretty much serve until they retire. That's what led to the effort to give the Senate an opportunity to question prospective judges rather than simply let governors appoint whomever they want from a list prepared by a special screening panel.

McGregor replaces Charles Jones, who reached the mandatory retirement age of 70.

She remains a supporter of the current system of selecting judges - a system that first made her a judge on the Court of Appeals.

Gov. Janet Napolitano, a Democrat who also supports the system, said it's up to the members of the State Bar to defend the courts.

"We don't want our judges involved in the political process *per se*," Napolitano said. "Those who use the courts, who understand how the judiciary works, need to be vocal advocates for the courts."

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