POLITICS IN A QUASI-TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

Daniel J. Elazar

Transformation of Israel's Political Configuration / Proposals for Electoral Reform / Division of Israeli Parties into Three Camps / Movement from Ideological to Territorial Democracy / Strategies for the Major Parties

TRANSFORMATION OF ISRAEL'S POLITICAL CONFIGURATION

It is a truism by now that Israeli politics has been transformed in the past decade from a system in which there was one dominant party, several medium-sized ones, and a few small ones, to one in which two parties of relatively equal strength are able to control between 70 and 80 percent of the seats in the Knesset. This configuration has produced a virtual stalemate in two successive elections, and has been accompanied by (perhaps even contributed to) the demise of medium-sized parties and the proliferation of small lists that have come to hold the balance of power in both Knesset and Government.

Given the present Israeli voting patterns and trends among Israeli voters, this situation is likely to continue, unless there is electoral reform. While demands for electoral reform have increased in the wake of the July 1984 elections, they are still being voiced by those on the political periphery, and are being met with deliberate and stony silence by those in the centers of political power. It is not well known that in March 1984, on the eve of the Knesset vote to call elections, that then Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir proposed to Shimon Peres that the two major parties agree to raise the minimum percentage needed to obtain a seat in the Knesset, as part of the election law, to prevent this proliferation of mini-parties. Peres rejected the proposal out of hand, making a strategic judgement that turned out to be a very poor one for his party. He and his party have held to their position, and did not include electoral reform in the coalition agreement establishing the national unity government.

PROPOSALS FOR ELECTORAL REFORM

The simplest type of electoral reform would be just what Shamir proposed: namely, raising the threshold for obtaining a seat in the Knesset, which presently stands at one percent of the total vote. As things now stand, Meir Kahane was able to win election *even* though he had a minuscule number of voters behind him. If the threshold were raised to three percent, virtually all the small parties elected to this Knesset would be eliminated. The medium-sized parties which fragmented—a phenomenon most notable in the religious camp—would have to reunite in order to win seats. Such a step would bring about a situation not dissimilar to that in the German Federal Republic: two major parties plus a third, medium-sized, one. Although this third party might hold the balance of power, it would also have greater incentives to exercise that power responsibly.

More far-reaching electoral reforms have been proposed, ranging from a simple system of constituency elections for all 120 Knesset seats; to more complicated formulas involving multi-member districts, with a certain percentage elected at large; to a proposal to divide the country into permanent electoral districts corresponding to its geopolitical regions, which would be allocated seats according to population. Whatever their merits, none of these plans have attracted real support among those who control the government, or sufficient support among the people themselves, to generate the overwhelming popular demand necessary to force the decision-makers to act. Hence, for all intents and purposes, we must envision a future in which the present situation, or something very much like it, prevails.

## DIVISION OF ISRAELI PARTIES INTO THREE CAMPS

The other factor to be considered is the division of Israeli political parties into three camps. Indeed, with all that has changed in recent years, including the fading concern with parties and ideologies within the Israeli body politic, these three camps have persisted. They continue to exist partly for party political reasons and partly as a reflection of the differences that divide Israel's political activists, even at a time when the old ideologies are much weakened.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the three camps do not relate to each other on a left-right continuum, but stand in something like a triangular relationship to one another, as portrayed in the figure. (The figure shows each party in relation to the others in its camp and to the other camps, in two dimensions. The outer plane of the triangle depicts the left-right dimension; the inner shows the degree of exclusiveness. Thus, in the religious camp Agudat Israel is at the religious right wing and its voters far removed from the other camps, while the Sephardic Torah Guardians (the Shas party) is nearly as far to the right religiously but its voters include many who were closer to the Likud.)

For a long time, preoccupation with European modes of political thought prevented us from seeing this fact, although there never was a time when Israel, and the Zionist movement before it, did not operate on that triangular basis. Thus, for certain purposes each of the camps is more to the left or more to the right than any of the others. What each has staked out for itself is a particular vision of what the Zionist enterprise and its creation, the Jewish State, is all about. At times that vision has assumed intensely ideological form; at other times, it has been more flexible.

The camps themselves are comprised of several parties each, some of which are quite antagonistic to one another within the same camp. (It is within the camps that left-right divisions do exist, with all that that implies.) The size of each camp is not fixed, either in relation to the total population or in relation to one another; but whatever the fluctuations in size, the camps themselves persist. Their persistence is manifested in the stability of camp (as distinct from party) allegiance in Knesset elections.

THE THREE CAMPS
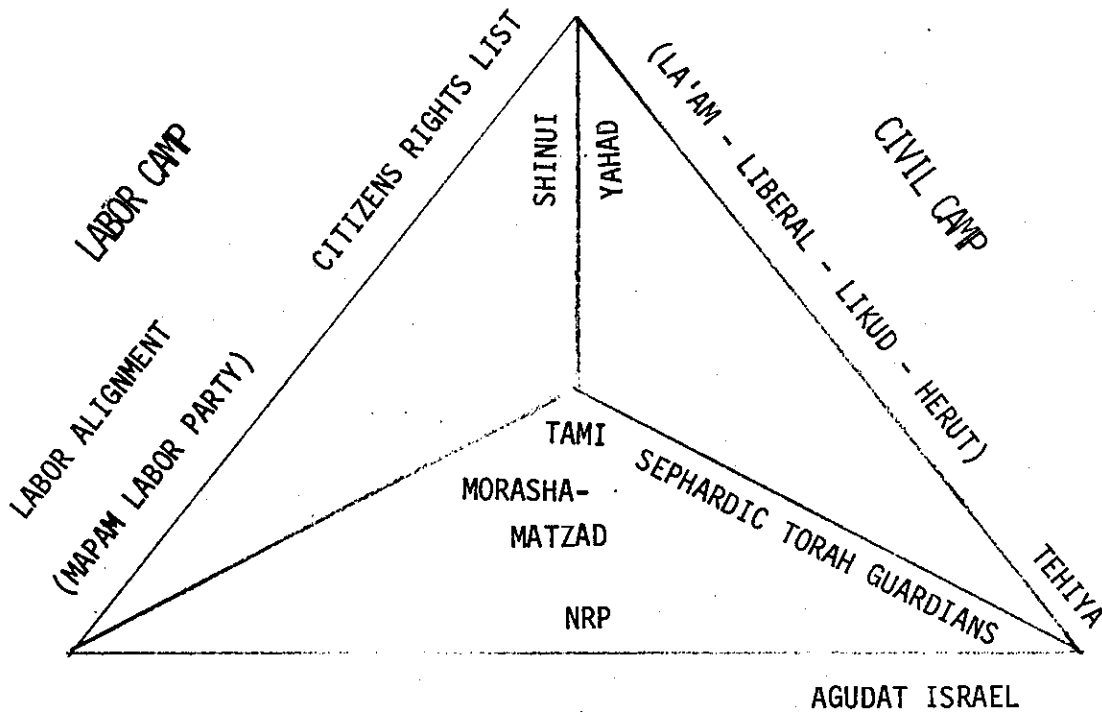
RELIGIOUS CAMP

After the Six-Day War, the camps seemed to be diminishing as political as well as social factors in Israeli society. Indeed, there has been a general movement in Israel from ideological to territorial democracy. Whereas during the pioneering days of the prestate Yishuv, the political and social system was organized through ideological groupings, the system was evolving into one in which the important ties and vital interests of the vast majority of its citizens stem from nonideological considerations, derived from the sheer fact of living in Israel.

SHIFT FROM IDEOLOGICAL TO TERRITORIAL DEMOCRACY

The movement from ideological to territorial democracy was a predominant feature of the first generation of Israeli statehood (1948-1977). David Ben-Gurion led the way after 1948 through his emphasis on *mamlakh tiut* (statism) in place of the earlier political ideologies. He insisted on provision of public services by the state, services formerly provided by the parties or camps; and in the economic sphere oversaw a shift from socialism to a quasi-state capitalism, for pragmatic reasons. But Ben-Gurion merely prefigured and strengthened what is a natural phenomenon in any new society, namely, the decline of the founding ideologies as the society takes shape and as the founders are succeeded by later generations. Those in the new generations are where they are because they happen to have been born there—not because they chose to be builders of the new society, motivated by an ideological credo.

Thus, a two-fold process took place in that first generation. The prestate parties, based on their respective ideologies, were forced to transfer functions and responsibilities to state institutions, and thereby lost much of the basis for their hold on their constituencies. At the same time their constituencies no longer found the ideologies compelling or relevant.

By the late 1960s, the new political leadership of the country was, with a few exceptions, also nonideological, having leanings in one direction or another, derived from the old ideologies, but basically pragmatic in their orientation. These leaders faced a new set of problems about which the old ideologies had little to say. Though the parties kept up some semblance of ideological commitment, it was understood to be merely a means of paying obeisance to the *halutzic* spirit of the past. This was most true of the Labor Party, which had become a broadbased coalition of sectors and factions, and least true of the religious parties, which did have religious ideologies from which they drew. (Although there, too, the largest of the religious parties—the National Religious Party—had become so pragmatic that the ideological dimension was only minimally relevant.)

Hence, it was not surprising that after the Six-Day War, the emergence of new issues, such as the future of the administered territories, and negotiation of peace with the Arabs, should have led to various fringe elements breaking off from one camp and moving to another, something which had not occurred before in Israeli politics. That, plus the defection of many Labor voters to the Likud, and the tendency on the part of the young to vote Likud no matter how their parents voted, caused many to believe that the camps themselves were breaking down.

The 1984 elections suggest that just the opposite is the case. It is true that the old ideologies are even less effective now than they were 15 years ago, and that territorial democracy has become even more entrenched in the Israeli scene, because the new ideologies correspond only roughly to existing party configurations. Yet, after the transformation of the party system it is clear that the camps are holding together quite well, and that voter shifts and party divisions are more often than not taking place within camps than across them.

Thus, the Labor camp embraces the Labor Alignment, which joined Mapam in uneasy alliance with the Labor Party until the former split away as a result of the establishment of the national unity government. The Labor camp also includes Shulamit Aloni's Citizens' Rights Movement, an earlier Labor Party breakaway.

The Likud was founded as an amalgam of the two major parties of the civil camp —the Herut and the Liberals—and acquired La'am in 1969, the one defection from the Labor camp that moved as a body across camps. In 1981, Tehiya broke away from the Likud, yet remained in the same camp. So, too, did the smaller fragments under Yigal Hurwitz and Ezer Weizman, which broke away in 1984. Both were identified by voters as being fully within the civil camp. Weizman's later decision to join the Labor Party led to a negative reaction among his voters, who never expected such a turn of events.

In every election since the establishment of the State of Israel, the religious camp has won between 12 and 18 seats as a camp, with the number usually ranging between 13 and 16. On one occasion almost the entire camp was united; on others it was divided between two parties: the National Religious Party and Agudat Israel. Occasionally Poalei Agudat Israel would run independently and win a seat on its own. This time the religious camp was fragmented among five parties which gained a total of 14 seats. What is significant is that all five religious parties—NRP, Agudat Israel, Matzad-Morasha, Sephardi Torah Guardians (Shas), and Tami—have stayed within their shared camp, however hostile the relationships are among them.

Amnon Rubinstein's Shinui seems the most problematic in terms of its location in a particular camp. Although Rubinstein has tried to avoid being identified with any one bloc, it is now quite clear that his voters and, for that matter, his running-mates, fall within the Labor camp. He himself demonstrated this in 1977, when he dissolved the Democratic Movement for Change after the late Yigael Yadin agreed to join the Begin government.

If the camps do not survive for ideological reasons, why do they? I would suggest that they have come to reflect diverse facets of Israel's emerging political culture, and differing affinities among Israeli voters in matters of political expectations and style. Political scientists have referred to these preferences as matters of "persuasion" rather than ideology—meaning, a loose set of orientations, rather than a clearcut doctrine focusing on specific programs and goals. However these differences are perceived, they continue to shape the configurations of Israeli politics and the limits of voter change. Such shifts as are taking place, among younger voters and Sephardim (the two groups overlap considerably), reflect a sorting out of persuasions as a result of generational change.

STRATEGIES FOR THE MAJOR PARTIES

Given this situation, the only strategy open to the major parties within the present electoral system is to try to maintain as much party unity as possible, to continue to build bridges with other parties in their respective camps, and to fight for the 5-10 percent of voters likely to shift their support, principally within but to some extent between camps, at election time. This might suggest that both parties should move toward a common center and, indeed, to a great extent they have done just that. But it seems that the small floating vote is not necessarily a centrist vote. Rather, it appears to be a vote that wants strong leadership and clearcut positions, and will support the party that seems to offer more of those than its rival.

In the 1984 elections, both major parties made the mistake of assuming that the floating vote was centrist and moderate, hence both tried to move toward the middle in their election campaigning, and to gloss over the issues in the process. But that, in turn, led to a shift among those voters not irrevocably wedded to either party. Disgusted with the wishy-washy character of the major party campaigns, they turned toward the smaller parties. It was only when the Likud caught on to what was happening and began to project a firmer image that it recovered enough of those voters within its camp and on the margins to prevent a significant Labor victory.

It may be that the Israeli voter is a different animal from others in this respect (though it is not certain that such is the case). But the party strategists would do well in the future to pursue the floating vote by taking stands on issues rather than by avoiding them; otherwise the floating vote will continue to go to the smaller parties, each of which does take firm stands, almost by definition.

As far as the religious bloc is concerned, it should be clear to them that without greater unity within their ranks they will have dissipated such influence as they have had in the past. The outcome of the recent elections actually represented something of a victory for the old NRP, despite its further loss of seats. The disaster which befell Agudat Israel removed much of the pressure from the right, which had forced the NRP to adopt more extreme stances on questions of religion and state than its accommodationist orientation required. The old NRP was uncomfortable whenever Agudat Israel insisted on matters like easier exemption of women from army service, amending the Law of Return with regard to the definition of "Who is a Jew?", or insisting on more stringent state enforcement of public Sabbath observance. Still, the NRP felt compelled to go along in order to maintain its credibility in the religious camp (which may or may not actually have been necessary). Indeed, Agudat

Israel was often as interested in embarrassing the NRP with its proposed legislation as it was in gaining passage of the legislation itself. For the moment, that threat is eliminated and the NRP can go back to being its old accommodationist self, especially in a national unity government. Certainly that is a major reason why Dr. Yosef Burg played a leading role in trying to bring Labor and Likud together.

With regard to the interests of Israel as a whole, electoral reform of at least a minimal kind remains the highest priority. Beyond that, it is apparent that, despite all previous discussions, the ideological differences which separate Labor and Likud have been substantially blurred. Indeed, there are probably stronger, sharper differences between the mainstream and peripheries within each party than between the mainstreams of each. Consequently, except insofar as narrow political interests will dictate otherwise, the two parties should be able to work together quite well on a day-to-day basis. The national unity government's inner circle will probably spend more time battling with those on the periphery, regardless of party, than against one another.

The Shas crisis is a case in point. NRP and Shas are mortal rivals, as were NRP and Tami before Shas's creation. Likud has a stake in keeping Shas in the coalition because, since 1977, its electoral strategy has been to keep the religious camp tied to it, to give it the edge needed to form a government, and to preserve that alliance for the future. The Likud leadership understands the key to coalition politics in Israel, namely, that no government has ever been formed that did not command majorities in at least two of the three camps. That is why talk of a government without religious parties in it flies in the face of the realities of Israeli politics, no matter how much strength the non-religious parties have.

The closeness of the mainstreams of the two parties could lead to a truly effective government, commanding such a substantial majority in the Knesset that it can act as it deems necessary. The key to that result, however, does not lie in the issue-orientations of the two parties, but rather in the quality of leadership that they bring to the government. The opportunity presented demands the kind of strong leadership characterizing a democratic republic—not in the sense of oppressive power, but in the sense of a self-assured leadership possessing moral strength. As such, it will be able to make hard policy choices and then be firm in the execution of its decisions; it will be capable of going to the people and mobilizing their support for those difficult choices. Whether the leadership of this government has that strength remains to be seen.

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Daniel J. Elazar is president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Senator N. M. Paterson Professor of Intergovernmental Relations at Bar-Ilan University.