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WHITHER THE NRP?

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Reorganization and Renewal / Ascendence and Decline / Ashkenazi-Sephardi Cleavage / Ideology and Politics / Secular-Religious Friction / Ideology and Policy

Reorganization and Renewal

The National Religious Party (NRP) has recently undertaken a process of reorganization and renewal, culminating in the elevation of Knesset Member Zevulun Hammer to replace veteran leader Dr. Yosef Burg as Minister of Religious Affairs. While no formal linkage exists between this event and the prime ministerial rotation between Shimon Peres of Labor and Likud leader Yitzhak Shamir, one could identify a certain symbolic connection.

Dr. Burg, the leader of the Lamifne faction which historically represented the left wing of the NRP, was replaced by the leader of the young guard, allied with the nationalist elements in the party. Hammer's coalition, which defeated Lamifne's Rabbi Moshe Solomon, included representatives of factions headed by MK Rabbi Haim Druckman and Professor Avner Shaki, both identified with fundamentalist positions on national and religious issues. Hammer's close identification with the Likud during the 1970s, Druckman's close association with Gush Emunim and Shaki's association with the Sephardim of his party also indicate a growing distance from Labor's position. Although it may be too early to determine definitely that the NRP is heading towards the right, it is very important to observe the party and try to ascertain which way it is moving. This question is pertinent for both symphathizers of religious Zionism and the NRP and for the general population interested in Israeli politics and foreign

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policy, especially with regard to Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), the Gaza Strip and relations between secular and religious Israelis in the Jewish state. Before attempting to predict whither the NRP, however, a short examination of the NRP's recent history is in order.

Ascendence and Decline

The NRP emerged from the 1977 elections with a victory second only to that of the Likud. The increase in votes over the 1973 elections was secondary to the improved political position NRP leaders found themselves in with the new government. Before 1977, the NRP was the traditional partner of the Labor Party or its predecessor, Mapai, a partnership that had started in 1935. Despite popular beliefs, the dominance of the Socialist camp in Israel never depended on the NRP's participation in government; Mapai or Labor could have always organized a ruling coalition without the NRP and without the participation of their main political opponents - Herut or its successors, Gahal (the Herut-Liberal block) and Likud. The partnership with the Mizrahi (the original name of the NRP) was therefore a result of political convenience and accommodation with the religious camp in Israeli society, with whom the ruling elite preferred to cooperate rather than confront. In this position, the NRP had to settle for second level ministries (such as Religious Affairs and Interior), which it nevertheless found to be important for its constituency. During those years, the NRP received none of the powerful or prestigious ministries such as Defense, Treasury, Foreign Affairs, or Education (so important to a party dedicated to traditional Jewish values), even though they constituted a medium-sized party with ten to twelve Knesset seats. Nor did the NRP play a major role in the formation of policies in these areas, despite the fact that it represented a broadly-based constituency.

Following the May 1977 elections, this situation was transformed. Likud could not assemble a coalition without the NRP, thus putting it in the position of power broker. Indeed the NRP not only joined the government, but brought with it Agudat Yisrael — the ultra-Orthodox party which had not participated in a government since the early 1950s. The NRP was handsomely rewarded. The long desired Education portfolio was given to Hammer, and Dr. Burg, while adding the police department to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior, emerged as an elder statesman in the new government. Prime Minister Begin sought his advice frequently.

The NRP's status improved further as the Likud declined in popularity polls. The young leaders of the NRP began to anticipate a day when they would become a major party on the Israeli political scene — similar to the European model of Christian democratic parties (see *Jerusalem Letter*, No. 24). Just as these hopes reached their peak, the internal and external contradictions of the NRP surfaced, and the party began a downward slide from which it has not yet recovered.

Ashkenazi-Sephardi Cleavage

The 1981 election campaign was marked by the reemergence of the issue of Ashkenazi-Sephardi cleavage in Israeli society. Likud's low standing at the polls convinced many of its leaders to campaign against Labor under the banner of social inequality between these two segments of Israeli society. Another issue which Likud strategists stressed as their accomplishment was the building of settlements in Judea and Samaria. While both issues were directed against Labor — which was identified with Ashkenazi domination and supportive of territorial compromise — the NRP was affected by them as well. While the majority of the NRP constituency was Sephardi, the party leadership was disproportionately Ashkenazi. Thus when, following a corruption affair, MK Abu-Hatzeira broke away from the party, many NRP Sephardi supporters, aroused by the militant anti-Ashkenazi climate, apparently decided to punish the NRP and voted for Abu-Hatzeira's Tami party. Similarly, the Tehiya Party, which drew upon the settlers' movement and Gush Emunim, attracted NRP nationalist supporters. Prime Minister Begin, himself a traditionalist with great respect for Jewish religious values, attracted other voters, especially when the contest between him and Labor's Shimon Peres became very close. As a result, the NRP's parliamentary strength was reduced by half in the 1981 election; Tehiya captured three formerly NRP seats and Abu-Hatzeira's Tami won another three. Likud again emerged as the largest party and the poll's analysis indicated that many traditional NRP

supporters voted for Begin.

The NRP's debacle continued in the ensuing years. Instead of trying to reform the party, NRP leaders relied on the fact that Prime Minister Begin entrusted them again with their previous portfolios – including Education – and even added an NRP deputy minister, Yehuda Ben Meir, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hammer and Burg realized the threat to the party from the continuing partnership with Likud and tried to break away and adopt an independent policy during the 1982 Lebanon War, but this change of heart came too late. Inter-factional strife in the party continued, resulting in the breakaway of Rabbi Haim Druckman, the leader of the ultra-nationalist Matzad faction. In the 1984 election, the NRP representation in the Knesset dropped to four. What may have been more significant, however, was the appearance of a whole plethora of parties, each representing a different assortment of religious and nationalist ideas. These were: Kahane (on the extreme right - 1 MK); Tami (1); Agudat Yisrael (2); Druckman's Morasha (2); Shas (the Sephardic religious party - 4) and Tehiya (five MKs, two of whom were religious).

At this point the NRP leadership could no longer hide its head in the sand. With Burg remaining as the only NRP minister in the government, Hammer took upon himself the function of Secrectary-General. A non-factional committee was formed. A census of members and supporters of the NRP formed the first stage of party rebuilding. The Yagur-Privas Committee reported 150,000 responses. This impressive response, which exceeded the membership of the Likud, demonstrated the appeal and strength of the national religious idea. The second stage was a party election, in which close to 100,000 registered voters participated, again exceeding the voters in Herut's internal election. The third stage was a party convention of the elected delegates, which in comparison to Herut's convention, was more civilized and ended with the election of all the party's main institutions and officers. While the Lamifne faction was defeated in most of the rounds, unity was preserved through a distribution of power among the two main factions, headed by Hammer, Burg, and few other small factions.

Ideology and Politics

What lesson should NRP leaders learn from these recent developments? Moreover, what are the implications of the NRP's decline on relations between the secular and religious segments in Israeli society?

The answer to the first question is that the alignment between the NRP and Likud, however comfortable ideologically, was politically problematic for the religious party. During the period when Labor was the dominant party in Israeli politics, and a tacit partnership existed between it and the NRP, a clear line divided the secular and religious parties. To be sure, there have always been religious voters who supported Herut, but the majority of the national religious camp was not swept away by the revisionist rhetoric of Menachem Begin. Voting for the party with whom the NRP was previously aligned – Labor – was even more difficult. The pronounced secular character of that party ensured that religious people would vote for the NRP to preserve their religious rights. These reservations disappeared during the Begin regime. Voting for a prime minister who supported religious values, the integrity of the Land of Israel and religious legislation appealed to the ordinary national religious voter.

NRP politicians, therefore, may calculate that despite their ideological proximity to the Likud, political interests may dictate that they not become permanent fixtures in a right-wing coalition. In the past, the NRP leaders' pronounced preference for the Likud convinced many of its potential supporters to vote directly for that party. Political wisdom tells us that NRP leaders will therefore try to distance themselves from the right-wing as much as possible without alienating their constituency, and posit themselves as potential partners to either of the two main blocs. From an electoral perspective, Labor and the NRP are complementary partners, as they appeal to two different audiences, while the Likud encroaches on NRP territory. One should not, therefore, be surprised to witness cooperation on various issues between the NRP and Labor. Signs of such cooperation could be found in municipal councils, in religious councils and in elections to the Chief Rabbinate.

The NRP's decline is not only measured by its Knesset seats. During the days of its alliance with Labor, the NRP enjoyed a monopoly over the state religious establishment and government handling of religious issues. Its only competitors, the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael, found itself essentially outside of the government and the national consensus, enjoying the right to remain separate but without influence in governing circles. Consequently, not only did the NRP control all the religious power centers, but it was the only party with whom the ruling party would bargain on the the main religious issues.

The situation has changed drastically in the last decade. Not only has Agudat Yisrael emerged as a respected representative of the religious camp, but it was joined by the other parties mentioned above, whether in the opposition or in the government. To make matters worse, religious members of the Knesset such as the Labor Party's Rabbi Menachem HaCohen have become champions of religious issues. In the new configuration, NRP MKs became just ordinary members of the religious lobby that has emerged in recent years in the Knesset. It is a far cry from its predominant position during the earlier period.

Secular-Religious Friction

Another manifestation of the last decade was the growing friction between secular and religious Israelis. Contrary to expectations, in an era of relative proximity between the ruling party and the main party of the religious camp, tension and mutual suspicion accelerated instead of declining. Obviously it is possible to point to the increased demands of the ultra-Orthodox parties for religious legislation and government financial support that prompted secular resistance and negative feelings. The fact that the Labor camp felt free of its commitments to a religious partner and had an inherent interest in exposing the price the Likud paid for the religious parties' support, could also be counted as a cause for the new tension.

While the religious camp has become more fundamentalist in recent years, the distance between secular Israelis and Jewish tradition has grown. The previous generation of secular Israelis, while ideologically opposed to traditional Judaism, still was not foreign to Orthodox values, practices and institutions. Second and third generation secular Israelis are totally unfamiliar with the Orthodox tradition. Contemporary Orthodox Israelis, in their turn, are more modernized than their fathers and therefore more militant. At the same time, they have also tended to turn to fundamentalist themes, such as the integrity of the Land of Israel or the "who is a Jew" issue. Religious Jews explain the militancy of secular Jews in the shallowness of secular Zionist ideology. The decline of Socialist Zionism has resulted in a spiritual vacuum that the intellectual elites are afraid may be filled with religious norms, thus transforming the basic secular ideological framework of the Jewish state.

Whatever the right interpretation may be, it is clear that the NRP's traditional place as a mediator between the two camps has become vacant. In the previous structure, a rupture was settled through political bargaining between the Labor and NRP leaders and normally led to a political compromise. The recognized leaders of each camp would have turned to their respective constituency and reduced the tension. The weakening of the NRP and the growing pluralistic structure of the religious camp makes the politics of accommodation and quid pro quo settlements between the two camps more difficult. Moreover, a weaker NRP may be tempted to come up with more militant attitudes in order to compete with the more fundamentalist parties in order to demonstrate its vitality. A more profound analysis of their constituency should reveal to the NRP leaders that the silent majority of the religious camp is interested in co-existence and mutual respect between religious and secular Israelis.

Indeed, the lesson is that the NRP has to function as a centrist and moderate party on both religious and national issues. By its nature, it cannot compete against Kahane and Tehiya on the right. Nor can it afford to find itself in permanent opposition, as an extremist, fundamentalist ideology would dictate. The strength of the NRP was in providing religious services to a constituency which finds itself an integral, though distinguishable, part of Israeli society. As a Zionist party, the NRP will never be accepted by the ultra-Orthodox community. Similarly, in order to restore its political strength, it cannot afford to become a one-issue party, but must maintain a pluralistic character in which several views can find their place. Finally, it has to

realize that the support of Gush Emunim may be important, but that the mass of its potential voters do not reside beyond the Green Line, but in the development towns and the big cities. In order to mobilize this population, it will have to come up with an agenda which these people will find relevant and a leadership which they will find representative.

Ideology and Policy

For the NRP to reemerge as a vital, broadly-based political force in Israel, it has to not only redraw its political alliance, but also to review its stand on various policy issues. Foreign policy and electoral reform are two key issues. These policies represent areas of critical significance to the future evolution of the Israeli polity and the NRPs' attitude may make a difference on both fronts.

Since the death in the early 1970s of its veteran leader, M.H. Shapira, the NRP became more and more identified with the nationalist camp in Israel. It was primarily NRP youth that formed Gush Emunim and, while in the government, the NRP supported the erection of Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria. During the Lebanese war, however, Burg and Hammer were among the ministers that demanded constraints in Sharons drive to conquer Beirut (see *Jerusalem Letter,* No. 52). It was then that some rethinking began in some quarters of the national religious camp. While Peres led the Israeli government and Burg was the only NRP minister, it was difficult to assess whether a new approach emerged within the NRP. Following the rotation and Shamir becoming Prime Minister, one could expect that the issue of settlements will reemerge. The return of the Matzad faction to the NRP will increase the number of NRP ministers to two – one of them, Yosef Shapira, is a dedicated supporter of settlements and Gush Emunim. Hammer will be in a position where his vote will be the deciding one in a government divided between center-left and Likud-Shas coalitions. In light of the NRP's interest to keep a distance from the Likud and rebuild a broadly based party not dominated by Matzad, Hammer may adopt an approach different from the one anticipated by the hawks of his party. By adopting a moderate stance he would indicate that the NRP has returned to be a pluralistic framework in which competing religious Zionist visions could find their place.

For many years, the NRP opposed changing the electoral system from one based purely on proportional representation to a constituency based system – or even to a mixture of the two such as a multi-member district system. It feared that such a change would eliminate its representation, or at best reduce its influence, since the majority party would not need the religious party to build a coalition following the elections. The new situation in which the NRP found itself following the recent two elections may give it the incentive to support a system in which voters choose between candidates rather than party lists.

The ability of small parties to achieve some representation under the existing system has affected the religious camp more than the socialist or civil camps. It is the most splintered camp of the three. Electoral reform would therefore force the religious parties to unite. Under such circumstances, the NRP, with the strongest party machinery and with experience in coalition politics, would stand the best chance of leading such a party. Moreover, in an electoral system which rewards the party with higher quality candidates, the NRP could win in districts with a tradition-oriented constituency, assuming that it could come up with better candidates than its competitors.

The election of religious mayors in cities like Tiberias and Ashkelon in personal elections, provides an example for the NRP to live up to, if it can remove some of its apparatus-dominated leadership and develop an organic local leadership. The usual track of an NRP youth, from a Bnai Akiva yeshiva to higher education – university or rabbinical college – puts him in a better position than his potential contenders in traditional or religious districts. Obviously, success in a multi-member district electoral system will depend to a large extent on the way the Israeli voting population will be divided into districts. A situation in which the two major parties are close to equal in strength is the best guarantee for reform from a proportional to a district system.

Each party will make sure that the other will not gain a majority through the slicing process.

Both areas will demand bold decisions on the part of the NRP, as they may determine the future of the party in terms of survival and vitality. Both issues are also very important to the future of Israel. Whether the NRP will be able to proceed with strength will depend on its leaders, who are no longer the traditional guides that maintained the party since the establishment of Israel. From now on, today's leaders will have no one to blame but themselves if the NRP does not return to a position of influence in the Israeli political system.

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