

A Counter-Coalition

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SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT happened this week in the most unlikely of places: the Knesset.

On the agenda were three laws, one worse than the other.

One was about “governance”. Its main provision raises the “electoral threshold”—i.e. the minimum an election list needs to enter the Knesset—from 2% to 3.25%. The obvious intention is to expel the three lists which derive their votes from the Arab sector, and which hover around this level.

The second was about “sharing the load equally”. Its declared aim is to compel thousands of orthodox youth to serve in the army, from which they are now exempted. In practice, the new law exempts them for another four years. Israelis call this “Israbluff”.

The third is about peace, or the lack of. It says that any agreement that would give up territory which is at present controlled by Israel would need affirmation by a referendum. Until now, referendums have been unknown in Israel. This law would apply to all territorial changes, no matter how minor.

What is the connection between these three bills? None whatsoever, except that they are printed on paper. However, each of them is disliked by at least one of the six factions that support the government, which could make its adoption impossible.

In order to have them all passed, the government coalition has imposed on its members a draconian measure: they have to vote for all three of them together, one after the other.

This has never happened before. It is another symptom of the creeping right-wing crudity that is the hallmark of this Knesset.

IN SELF-DEFENCE, the opposition parties have done something that is also unprecedented in Israel: they have declared a boycott of the Knesset plenum. Not a single opposition member attended the plenum during the debate on these bills and the vote on them. They set up an “alternative plenum”, where they held a lively debate.

The opposition consists of diverse elements, which do not ordinarily cooperate:

There are the left-wing Zionist parties: the Labor party

and Meretz.

There are the two orthodox religious factions: the Torah Jewish faction (consisting of two separate parties) and the Oriental orthodox party, Shas.

And there are the three “Arab” parties: the nationalist Balad party, the moderate Islamic party and the Communist party, which has also a small Jewish component.

All these diverse political groupings have come together to express their outrage about the dictatorial measures of the Right. Their unprecedented boycott of the Knesset votes underlines the seriousness of the parliamentary crisis, though it did not prevent the laws being adopted.

The media excitement about the crisis hid, however, a much more serious aspect, one that may have a fundamental impact on the future of Israel.

ALL THREE Israeli TV networks devoted only a few minutes to what was happening in the Knesset plenum, and concentrated on the much more interesting happenings in the counter-plenum.

They showed, for example, the Shas leader, Ariyeh Deri, rubbing heads with a prominent Labor deputy. It was more than a brotherly gesture. It was a political statement.

From the first day of the State of Israel, for 29 consecutive years, the country was governed by the Labor party, in close cooperation with the religious Jewish parties. (Before that, this same coalition had “ruled” the Jewish community in Palestine since 1933.)

The historic turn-about of 1977, which brought the Likud to power, happened when the religious parties turned their back on the Labor party and joined the new right-wing coalition of Menachem Begin. This was more than a political maneuver. It was a tectonic shift that changed the landscape of Israel.

Since then, the right-wing-religious coalition has ruled Israel (with short intermissions). It seemed unshakable, and condemned Israel to a dark future of apartheid, occupation and settlements.

It also seemed natural. Jewish religion asserts that God personally promised the whole of the Holy Land to the Israelites. Religious schools teach a wholly judeo-centered outlook, ignoring the rights of others. The products of this education seem to be the natural allies of the Likud’s the-Whole-of-Eretz-Israel ideology.

The events of this week show that it ain't necessarily so. The orthodox anti-Zionists can shake hands with secular Zionists and—incredibly—also with Arabs.

It brought into focus the basic rift between the orthodox, whose Judaism is the old-time religion of the shtetl, and the Zionist “nationalist-religious”, whose Judaism is a tribal mix of blood and earth. For the orthodox, Judaism is not the enemy of peace. On the contrary, Shalom and the good treatment of foreigners are commanded by God.

If this three-cornered secular-orthodox-Arab idyll holds, it may be the forerunner of a new political turn-about, the end of the era that started in 1977.

IN ORDER to understand what is happening, one has to understand the importance of *Understanding*. Understanding others.

The orthodox community is a separate section of Israel, much like the Arab section, and perhaps even more so. They are different from mainstream Israelis in almost everything—cultural outlook, historical orientation, language (many speak Yiddish), clothing, even body language. They are rather like the Amish in the US.—except that they constitute about 15% of the population.

The present crisis is not caused by their dislike of the army and the entire Zionist ideology. It goes much deeper. Their main aim is survival in an increasingly hostile world. They need to keep absolute control of their sons and daughters from birth to death, not allowing them to come into contact with the non-orthodox at any stage of their life. Therefore they cannot be allowed to attend ordinary schools, join the army, work at ordinary working places, live in secular neighborhoods. They cannot eat in non-orthodox company, nor—God forbid!!!—meet secular members of the opposite sex. Total isolation is their recipe for survival.

Israeli right-wingers, with their fixed and self-centered outlook, are quite unable to understand this, much as they are unable to understand the mind of the Arab citizens. What the hell! Why should an Israeli Jewish mother spend sleepless nights worrying about her soldier son, while these shirkers enjoy life?

For an orthodox boy, of course, it is as unthinkable to stop studying the Talmud as it is for an Arab boy to shoot at his Palestinian brothers.

The army chiefs, by the way, do not want to have either. They shudder at the thought of training and arming Arab youth, except for a few Bedouin and Druze mercenaries. They shudder at the thought of absorbing thousands of orthodox, who would need separate camps, so as not to come in contact, including eye-contact, with girls. Not to mention their need for synagogues, ritual baths, special kosher food and their own rabbis, who could countermand any order by an ordinary officer.

However, no army officer will say so openly. The old Zionist vision forbids it. Our army is a Citizen's Army, everybody serves in it without discrimination, equality in the defense of the homeland is sacred.

Because of this, convoluted legal tricks of self-deceit have been in place for decades. Now the country has to face them.

To my mind, we should face reality: the orthodox (and the Arab citizens) are special minorities, who need a special status. The present actual situation should be legalized, without tricks and ploys. The orthodox (and the Arabs) should be officially exempted. Perhaps our army should follow western examples and turn altogether into a professional, volunteer army.

BUT THIS is a side point. The main question is this:

Can the old alliance between the left-wing and the orthodox be renewed?

Can there be a fundamental change in the distribution of political forces?

Can the coalition of the Right and the “nationalist-religious” messianic camp, including its fascist fringes, become a political minority again?

Can a counter-coalition of the Left and the orthodox (yes, with the Arab citizens) come to power?

It is not impossible, yet you have to be an optimist to believe so.

However, you have to be an optimist to believe in anything good.