

A Parliamentary Mob

WHEN I was first elected to the Knesset, I was appalled at what I found. I discovered that, with rare exceptions, the intellectual level of the debates was close to zero. They consisted mainly of strings of clichés of the most commonplace variety. During most of the debates, the plenum was almost empty. Most participants spoke vulgar Hebrew. When voting, many members had no idea what they were voting for or against, they just followed the party whip.

That was 1967, when the Knesset included members like Levy Eshkol and Pinchas Sapir, David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan, Menachem Begin and Yohanan Bader, Meir Yaari and Yaakov Chazan, for whom today streets, highroads and neighborhoods are named.

In comparison to the present Knesset, that Knesset now looks like Plato's Academy.

WHAT FRIGHTENED me more than anything else was the readiness of members to enact irresponsible laws for the sake of fleeting popularity, especially at times of mass hysteria. One of my first Knesset initiatives was to submit a bill which would have created a second chamber, a kind of Senate, composed of outstanding personalities, with the power to hold up the enactment of new laws and compel the Knesset to reconsider them after an interval. This, I hoped, would prevent laws being hastily adopted in an atmosphere of excitement.

The bill was not considered seriously, neither by the Knesset nor by the general public. The Knesset almost unanimously voted it down. (After some years, several of the members told me that they regretted their vote.) The newspapers nicknamed the proposed chamber "the House of Lords" and ridiculed it. Haaretz devoted a whole page of cartoons to the proposal, depicting me in the garb of a British peer.

So there is no brake. The production of irresponsible laws, most of them racist and anti-democratic, is booming. The more the government itself is turning into an assembly of political hacks, the more the likelihood of its preventing such legislation is diminishing. The present government, the largest, basest and most despised in Israel's history, is cooperating with the Knesset members who submit such bills, and even initiating them itself.

The only remaining obstacle to this recklessness is the Supreme Court. In the absence of a written constitution, it has taken upon itself the power to annul scandalous laws that violate democracy and human rights. But the Supreme Court itself is beleaguered by rightists who want to destroy it, and is moving with great caution. It intervenes only in the most extreme cases.

Thus a paradoxical situation has arisen: parliament, the highest expression of democracy, is itself now posing a dire threat to Israeli democracy.

THE MAN who personifies this phenomenon more than anyone else is MK Michael Ben-Ari of the "National Union" faction, the heir of Meir Kahane, whose organization "Kach" ("Thus") was outlawed many years ago because of its openly fascist character.

Kahane himself was elected to the Knesset only once. The reaction of the other members was unequivocal: whenever he rose to speak, almost all the other members left the hall. The rabbi had to make his speeches before a handful of ultra-right colleagues.

A few weeks ago I visited the present Knesset for the first time since its election. I went there to listen to a debate about a subject that concerns me too: the decision of the Palestinian Authority to boycott the products of the settlements, a dozen years after Gush Shalom started this boycott. I spent some hours in the building, and from hour to hour my revulsion deepened.

The main cause was a circumstance I had not been aware of: MK Ben-Ari, the disciple and admirer of Kahane, holds sway there. Not only is he not an isolated outsider on the fringe of parliamentary life, as his mentor had been, but on the contrary, he is at the center. I saw the members of almost all other factions crowding around him in the members' cafeteria and listening to his perorations with rapt attention in the plenum. No doubt can remain that Kahanism – the Israeli version of fascism – has moved from the margin to center stage.

Recently, the country witnessed a scene that looked like something from the parliament of South Korea or Japan.

On the Knesset speaker's rostrum stood MK Haneen Zoabi of the Arab nationalist Balad faction and tried to explain why she had joined the Gaza aid flotilla that had been attacked by the Israeli navy. MK Anastasia Michaeli, a member of the Lieberman party, jumped from her seat and rushed to the rostrum, letting out blood-curdling shrieks, waving her arms, in order to remove Haneen Zoabi by force. Other members rose from their seats to help Michaeli. Near the speaker, a threatening crowd of Knesset members gathered. Only with great difficulty did the ushers succeed in saving Zoabi from bodily harm. One of the male members shouted at her, in a typical mixture of racism and sexism: "Go to Gaza and see what they will do to a 41 year old unmarried woman!"

One could not imagine a greater contrast than that between the two MKs. While Haneen Zoabi belongs to a family whose roots in the Nazareth area go back centuries, perhaps to the time of Jesus, Anastasia Michaeli was born in (then) Leningrad. She was elected "Miss St. Petersburg" and then became a fashion model, married an Israeli, converted to Judaism, immigrated to Israel at age 24 but sticks to her very Russian first name. She has given birth to eight children. She may be a candidate for the Israeli Sarah Palin, who, after all, was also once a beauty queen..

As far as I could make out, not a single Jewish member raised a finger to defend Zoabi during the tumult. Nothing but some half-hearted protest from the Speaker, Reuven Rivlin, and a Meretz member, Chaim Oron.

In all the 61 years of its existence, the Knesset had not seen such a sight. Within a minute the sovereign assembly turned into a parliamentary lynch mob.

One does not have to support the ideology of Balad to respect the impressive personality of Haneen Zoabi. She

speaks fluently and persuasively, has degrees from two Israeli universities, fights for the rights of women within the Israeli-Arab community and is the first female member of an Arab party in the Knesset. Israeli democracy could be proud of her. She belongs to a large Arab extended family. The brother of her grandfather was the mayor of Nazareth, one uncle was a deputy minister and another a Supreme Court judge. (Indeed, on my first day in the Knesset I proposed that another member of the Zoabi family be elected as Speaker.)

This week, the Knesset decided by a large majority to adopt a proposal by Michael Ben-Ari, supported by Likud and Kadima members, to strip Haneen Zoabi of her parliamentary privileges. Even before, Interior Minister Eli Yishai had asked the Legal Advisor to the Government for approval of his plan to strip Zoabi of her Israeli citizenship on the grounds of treason. One of the Knesset members shouted at her: "You have no place in the Israeli Knesset! You have no right to hold an Israeli identity card!"

On the very same day, the Knesset took action against the founder of Zoabi's party, Azmi Bishara. In a preliminary hearing, it approved a bill – this one, too, supported by both Likud and Kadima members – aimed at denying Bishara his pension, which is due after his resignation from the Knesset. (He is staying abroad, after being threatened with an indictment for espionage.)

The proud parents of these initiatives, which enjoy massive support from Likud, Kadima, Lieberman's party and all the religious factions, do not hide their intention to expel all the Arabs from parliament and establish at long last a pure Jewish Knesset. The latest decisions of the Knesset are but parts of a prolonged campaign, which gives birth almost every week to new initiatives from publicity-hungry members, who know that the more racist and anti-democratic their bills are, the more popular they will be with their electorate.

Such was this week's Knesset decision to condition the acquisition of citizenship on the candidate's swearing allegiance to Israel as a "Jewish and democratic state", thus demanding that Arabs (especially foreign Arab spouses of Arab citizens) subscribe to the Zionist ideology. The equivalent would be the demand that new American citizens swear allegiance to the USA as a "white Anglo-Saxon protestant state".

There seems to be no limit to this parliamentary irresponsibility. All red lines have been crossed long ago. This does not concern only the parliamentary representation of more than 20% of Israel's citizens, but there is a growing tendency towards depriving all Arab citizens of their citizenship altogether.

THIS TENDENCY is connected with the ongoing attack on the status of the Arabs in East Jerusalem.

This week I was present at the hearing in Jerusalem's magistrates court on the detention of Muhammed Abu Ter, one of the four Hamas members of the Palestinian parliament from Jerusalem. The hearing was held in a tiny room, which can seat only about a dozen spectators. I succeeded only with great difficulty in getting in.

After they were elected in democratic elections, in conformity with Israel's explicit obligation under the Oslo

agreement to allow the Arabs in East Jerusalem to take part, the government announced that their "permanent resident" status had been revoked.

What does that mean? When Israel "annexed" East Jerusalem in 1967, the government did not dream of conferring citizenship on the inhabitants, which would have significantly increased the percentage of Arab voters in Israel. Neither did they invent a new status for them. Lacking other alternatives, the inhabitants became "permanent residents", a status devised for foreigners who wish to stay in Israel. The Minister of the Interior has the right to revoke this status and deport such people to their countries of origin.

Clearly, this definition of "permanent residents" should not apply to the inhabitants of East Jerusalem. They and their forefathers were born there, they have no other citizenship and no other place of residence. The revoking of their status turns them into politically homeless people without protection of any kind.

The state lawyers argued in court that with the cancellation of his "permanent resident" status, Abu Ter has become an "illegal person" whose refusal to leave the city warrants unlimited detention.

(A few hours earlier, the Supreme Court dealt with our petition concerning the investigation of the Gaza flotilla incident. We won a partial, but significant, victory: for the first time in its history, the Supreme Court agreed to interfere in a matter concerning a commission of inquiry. The court decided that if the commission requires the testimony of military officers and the government tries to prevent this, the court will intervene.)

IF SOME people are trying to delude themselves into believing that the parliamentary mob will harm "only Arabs", they are vastly mistaken. The only question is: who is next in line?

This week, the Knesset gave the first reading to a bill to impose heavy penalties on any Israeli who advocates a boycott on Israel, in general, and on economic enterprises, universities and other Israeli institutions, including settlements, in particular. Any such institution will be entitled to an indemnity of 5000 dollars from every supporter of the boycott.

A call for boycott is a democratic means of expression. I object very much to a general boycott on Israel, but (following Voltaire) am ready to fight for everybody's right to call for such a boycott. The real aim of the bill is, of course, to protect the settlements: it is designed to deter those who call for a boycott of the products of the settlements which exist on occupied land outside the borders of the state. This includes me and my friends.

Since the foundation of Israel, it has never stopped boasting of being the "Only Democracy in the Middle East". This is the jewel in the crown of Israeli propaganda. The Knesset is the symbol of this democracy.

It seems that the parliamentary mob, which has taken over the Knesset, is determined to destroy this image once and for all, so that Israel will find its proper place somewhere between Libya, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.