

Das System

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TO A FOREIGNER, like myself, the US election system looks cock-eyed.

The president is elected by an “electoral college”, which does not necessarily reflect the will of the people. This system, rooted in the realities of the 18th century, has no connection with the conditions of today. It easily leads to the election of a president who has attracted the votes of only a minority, depriving the majority of its democratic rights.

Because of this archaic system, the final three days of the campaign are devoted solely to “swing states” – those whose electoral college votes are still in doubt.

At best, a curious way of electing the leader of the world’s mightiest power and self-proclaimed champion of democracy.

The system of electing governors, senators and representatives is also very dubious, as far as democracy is concerned. It’s the ancient British system of “winner takes all”. This means that there is no chance at all for ideological or sectarian minorities to be represented in the entire political system. New and controversial ideas have no chance.

The philosophy behind such a system is to prefer stability over full democracy, slow down change and innovation or prevent it altogether. It is typical for a conservative aristocracy.

It seems that no serious voices in the US advocate change in the system. If President Obama or President Romney is elected this week by a tiny majority in Ohio, whatever the popular vote nationwide, so be it. After all, the system has worked well enough for more than 200 years, so why tinker with it now?

IN THE Israel elections, on the contrary, several parties talk incessantly about “The System”. *“The System is bad”*. *“The System must be changed”*. *“Vote for me, because I am going to change The System”*.

What system, exactly? Well, that’s up to you, the voter. You can read into it whatever you like (or, rather, whatever you dislike). The elections. The economy. The courts. Democracy. Religion. You name it.

Frankly, whenever a politician starts to talk about “The

System”, I get goose pimples. Translate these two words into German, and you get “Das System”.

“Das System” was the main propaganda target of Adolf Hitler throughout his 13-year struggle for power. It was incredibly effective.¹

What did the Nazis mean when they spoke about “Das System”? Everything and nothing. Whatever their audience hated at any particular moment. The economy, which condemned millions to unemployment and destitution. The republic, which was responsible for economic policy. Democracy, which founded the republic. The Jews, for sure, who invented democracy and ruled the republic. The political parties, who served the Jews. And so on.

WHEN ISRAELI politicians thunder against “The System”, they generally mean the electoral system.

This started right from the beginning of the state. David Ben-Gurion was a democrat, but he was also an autocrat. He wanted more power. He was disgruntled by the proliferation of political parties, which compelled him to cobble together cumbersome coalitions. Who needs them?

The State of Israel was but a continuation of the Zionist movement, which always had some kind of elections. These were strictly proportional. Every group could set up a party, every party was represented in the Zionist congresses according to the number of its voters. Simple and democratic.

When the Israeli state was founded in 1948, this system was automatically adopted. It has not changed to this day, except that the “minimum clause” was raised from one percent to two. At the last elections, 33 parties competed, 12 of which passed the 2% threshold and are represented in the Knesset, which has just resolved to dissolve itself.

On the whole, this system worked reasonably well. It assured that all segments of society – national, ethnic, confessional, socio-economic and so on – were represented and could feel that they belonged. New ideas could find political expression. I myself was elected three times.

That is one of the explanations for the miracle that was Israeli democracy – a phenomenon that is well-nigh inexplicable, considering that almost all Israelis came from

¹The second most effective one was his condemnation of the “November Criminals” who signed the armistice after the defeat of Germany in World War I. Our own fascists now speak about the “Oslo Criminals”.

severely anti-democratic countries – Russia of the Czar and the commissars, Morocco, Iraq and Iran of the authoritarian kings, Poland of Jozef Pilsudski and his heirs, and of course Jews and Arabs born in Ottoman and British Palestine.

But the founder of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, was an admirer of the Kaiser's Germany, in which democracy developed to a certain degree, and also of Great Britain. The founding fathers who came from Russia wanted to be progressive like Western Europeans.

Because of this, Israel maintained a democracy that was, at least at the beginning, equal to the best. The slogan "The Only Democracy in the Middle East" was not yet a joke. It also provided stable government, based on changing coalitions.

Ben-Gurion hated the electoral system. His fulminations against it were dismissed by the general public, including his own voters, as a personal quirk. In 1977 a new party, called Dash, gained 15 seats on the sole platform point of changing the electoral system, which it blamed for all the country's ills. The party disappeared at the next election.

THIS DECEASED party's rightful heir is now the new party of Ya'ir Lapid, "There is a Future" which wants to "Change The System", including the electoral system.

In which direction? Up to this moment, that is not clear at all. A US-type presidential system? A British winner-takes-all constituency system? The postwar German system (which I prefer) under which half the Parliament is elected in country-wide proportional elections, and the other half in majority-vote constituencies?

What else does Lapid want to change? Laudably, he is the only one who has brought up the Palestinian issue, declaring that he will be no part of any government that does not resume talks with the Palestinians. This does not mean too much, since talks can go on endlessly and lead nowhere, as in the past. He did not mention the word "peace". He also promised that Jerusalem will not be divided – a promise guaranteed to make any negotiations impossible. He made his statement in Ariel, the capital of the settlers, which is boycotted by the entire peace movement.

HOWEVER, THE main enemy of "The System" is Avigdor Lieberman. In his mouth, the two words regain their original fascist undertones.

This week Binyamin Netanyahu dropped a bombshell: the Likud and Lieberman's "Israel Our Home" party will form a joint election list – thus setting in motion the creation of a joint party. The list will be called "Likud Beit-einu" ("Likud Our Home"). He easily imposed this on his

reluctant party – though nobody knew the details of the agreement.

But the main provisions of the oral agreement have already seeped out: Lieberman will be No. 2 on the list and will be able to choose one of the three major ministries in the next government: Defense, Treasury or Foreign Affairs.

There can not be the slightest doubt that Lieberman will choose Defense, though he tried to reassure the public by pretending that he might prefer Foreign Affairs, his present domain, in which he is boycotted by most of the world's major leaders.

The subtext of the agreement is that the two parties will soon become one, that Lieberman will succeed Netanyahu as the leader of the entire right-wing, and that we may see him in a few weeks time as the almighty Minister of Defense, with his finger on the conventional and nuclear triggers, and, even more frightening, as the sole governor of the Palestinian occupied territories.

Many Israelis shudder.

Just a few years ago, such an idea was unthinkable. Though he came to Israel 30 long years ago, Lieberman has remained the quintessential "Russian immigrant". Actually he came from Soviet Moldavia.

There is something deeply sinister about his appearance, facial expression, shifty eyes and body language. His accent in Hebrew is heavily Russian, his language is crude. He projects an unbridled lust for power, in the most brutal sense.

His closest (and perhaps only) foreign friend is Alexander Lukashenko, the president of Belarus and the last remaining dictator in Europe. His main object of admiration is Vladimir Putin.

Lieberman's unabashed credo is ethnic cleansing, an Araber-rein Jewish state. He has brought with him from the Soviet Union an abysmal contempt for democracy and a belief in "strong government".

Years ago I drew up the equation:

"Bolshevism - Marxism = Fascism"

13 TIMES In his 2-minute announcement to the nation about the fusion, Netanyahu used the words "strong" (strong government, strong Likud, strong I), mighty (mighty Israel, mighty Likud) and "governability", a new Hebrew word beloved by both Lieberman and Netanyahu. (This week several commentators used the name I coined some years ago: Bieberman.)

If the Bieberman wins this election, it will indeed be the end of "Das System" - and the beginning of a frightening new chapter in the history of our nation.