

Divide et Impera

Uri Avnery

July 21, 2012

WHATEVER IS HAPPENING to the Israeli social protest movement?

Good question. It is not only being asked abroad, but in Israel, too.

Last year the movement reached its peak in a giant demonstration. Hundreds of thousands marched in Tel Aviv.

The government did what governments do in such situations: it appointed a commission, headed by a respected professor named Manuel Trajtenberg. The commission made some good but limited recommendations, a tiny fraction of which were actually implemented.

In the meantime, the protest movement hibernated. For no good reason, it was somehow accepted that a protest movement should act only in summertime. (Personally, I much prefer winter demonstrations. Summers are really too damn hot.)

WHEN SUMMER 2012 came around – and a specially hot summer it is – the protest movement moved again.

Daphni Leef, who had started it all, called for a demonstration. She gathered around her some 10,000 people, a respectable number but far less than last year's multitudes. And for a good (or bad) reason: on the very same day and at the very same hour, less than a kilometer away, another demonstration was taking place. It was about army service (more about that later).

Last Saturday night, Daphni called for another protest, and again some 10,000 gathered. Why not more? Because on the very same day and at the very same hour another demonstration took place on Tel Aviv's seashore.

What was the difference between the two? None whatsoever. Both claimed to be the legitimate successor of last year's protest. They used the same slogans.

I don't generally subscribe to conspiracy theories. But this time it was hard not to suspect that some hidden hand was applying the old Roman maxim "divide et impera", divide and rule.¹

THE SUCCESS of Daphni's demonstration last Saturday was assured by an event nobody could have foreseen.

When the march reached the government quarter of Tel Aviv (the former village of Sarona, founded by German religious settlers in the mid 19th century) something shocking happened. One of the protesters, a middle-aged man from Haifa, set himself on fire and suffered terrible burns.

Jews are not Buddhist monks and nothing like this has ever happened here before. Desperate people commit suicide, but not publicly and not by fire. I think that since the days when converted Jews were burned by the Spanish inquisition, Jews have abhorred this kind of death.

The man, Moshe Silman, was a hard-luck story. Last year he was active in the protest movement. He was a small entrepreneur

who twice failed in business, suffered a series of strokes and was left with nothing but large debts. He was about to be evicted from his small apartment. Rather than become homeless, he decided to take his life, after distributing a suicide note to people around him.

Most believers in the American way would probably say that his failure was his own fault, and that nobody had to help him. Jewish ethics are different and demand that a person in desperation, even if caused by his own failures, should be assured of a minimum existence compatible with human dignity.

Binyamin Netanyahu, an ardent admirer of the free market, published a statement dismissing the event as a "personal tragedy". The demonstrators answered with posters: "*Bibi, you are our personal tragedy!*"

Silman has become a national symbol. He has given a huge push to the protest movement, which has now resumed its place in public consciousness.

HOWEVER, THE news at the moment is dominated by the competing protest – the one concerning military service.

It is not about refusing service in the army because of the occupation. Such refusers are few, and their courageous acts find, alas, no echo.

No, it is about an entirely different subject: the fact that 6000 able-bodied orthodox youngsters are excused every year from military service, as well as from the alternative civilian service. Those youngsters who serve three full years in the army and then almost a month every year in the reserves are fed up. They demand "equal division of duty". Among the secular majority, and even among the Zionist religious youth, this is a hugely popular slogan.

Its popularity can be measured by the fact that Itzik Shmuli is there. Shmuli, it will be remembered, is the ambitious student leader who joined Daphni last year and then left her in the lurch. Recently it was disclosed that one of Israel's foremost tycoons has given him 200,000 dollars for a project.

The orthodox don't dream of serving. They have very good reasons. For example: the study of the Torah is obviously more important for the security of the state than military service, since, as everybody knows, God protects us only as long as this study goes on.²

The real reason for the orthodox is, of course, their determination to avoid at all costs any contact between their boys and girls and ordinary Israelis, who are steeped in alcohol, crime, sex and drugs.

Netanyahu could easily rule without the orthodox by relying on his secular partners. But he knows that in times of trouble, the orthodox will stick with him, while the others may well melt away.

¹ Seems that it was not really coined by the Romans, but by the French king Louis XIV, who said "diviser pour régner".

² I once talked about this with Ariel Sharon, and to my surprise and consternation he agreed with this theory.

This week his fertile mind was feverishly dreaming up compromise solutions that would change everything, while leaving the status quo completely unchanged. For example, it was proposed to draft all religious males, but not at the age of 18, like everybody else, but at the age of 26, when virtually all orthodox men are already married with four children, making their conscription impossible or vastly expensive.

ONLY 70 days ago, the Kadima party hurriedly joined the government. Its justification was that a coalition comprising 80% of the Knesset would provide Netanyahu with the necessary safety net for a total overhaul of the military draft exemption system.

The real reason was that Kadima had been left without any issue it could call its own. Still the largest faction in the Knesset, with one seat more than the Likud, it was threatened with total annihilation in the next election. A squabble with the hated orthodox could change all that.

So this week, on the 70th day of its membership in the glorious coalition, Kadima left again. It can now march towards the coming elections under the proud banner of Equal Service For All.

THERE IS another angle to this story.

The orthodox are not the only ones exempted from military (and civilian) service. So are the Arab citizens, though for quite different reasons.

The Israeli army never wanted to draft the Arabs and give them – God forbid! - military training and arms. Only the Druze, an old religious-ethnic community with a vague connection to Shiite Islam, do serve, as do a few Bedouin.

Now, with Equal Service slogans rampant, this exemption is coming up, too. Why don't the Arabs serve? Why are they not

called up, at least, for civilian service?

The Arab citizens refuse, of course. Military service against their own people – fellow Palestinians and fellow Arabs – is out of the question. They refuse civilian service, too, claiming that the state that discriminates against them in so many ways has no right to call them up at all. Even when offered social service within their own community they refuse, causing much resentment among Jewish youths who have to go to the army while Arabs of the same age can go to university or earn good money working.

Thus the movement for Equal Service is in the happy position of attacking the two communities most hated by the majority: the orthodox and the Arabs. Bigotry, racism and secularism, all in the name of equality. Who could wish for more?

NETANYAHU IS now left with his former small majority. He has to find a quick solution to the service of the orthodox, since the Supreme Court is breathing down his neck. The present draft law, which was rejected by the court, expires at the end of this month. By then, a new law must be in place.

For Netanyahu, the preferred solution is calling early elections, perhaps next February. He would like that, since currently there is no one around who could compete with his popularity. New parties would have no time to establish themselves.

But Netanyahu is no gambler. He has no appetite for risk-taking. With elections, like wars, one can never be quite sure of the outcome. Stuff happens.

An excellent alternative would be to split Kadima. Having just started to enjoy the sweet taste of government, some of its members may feel disinclined to let go. The Likud would be only too happy to receive them into its ranks.

Divide et impera may have life in it yet.