

Filling the Black Hole

Uri Avnery

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SO WE HAVE two election campaigns in the next three months – one in the USA and one in Israel. I don't know which of them is more important for our lives.

In many respects, the two elections are very different. But in some others, they are strikingly similar.

It may be interesting to make some comparisons.

THE US elections are far more corrupt than ours. Inevitably so.

Since the advent of TV, they have become hugely expensive. TV ads cost a lot of money. Enough money can come only from big corporations and billionaires. Both candidates are heavily mortgaged to pressure groups and commercial interests, which they will have to serve from Day One in office.

The immense power of the pro-Israel lobby in the US derives from this fact. It's not so much about Jewish votes. It's about Jewish money.

The only way to change this is to provide the two sides free TV time and limit political TV advertising. That is highly unlikely, because the billionaires of both sides will not give up their stranglehold on the system. Why would they?

In Israel, all parties get free TV and radio time, according to their size in the outgoing Knesset (with a guaranteed minimum for newcomers). Outlays are strictly controlled. That does not prevent the same type of corruption. The same Sheldon Adelson finances both Mitt Romney and Binyamin Netanyahu. But the amount of tainted money raised and expended in Israel is much smaller.

On the other hand, we have no presidential debates. No Israeli prime minister would be so foolish as to agree to them. In the US debates, when a challenger faces the incumbent, the challenger gets a big prize right at the beginning of the first debate. Until that moment, he is a mere politician, far away from the White House. Suddenly he is raised to the status of a potential president, who looks and sounds presidential. Netanyahu would never agree to that.¹

THE MAIN difference between the two elections corresponds to the difference between the two political systems.

The US presidential elections are competitions between two persons, winner takes all. This means, in practice, that the entire battle is for the votes of a tiny minority of "independents" (or "swing voters") in a small number of states. All the others already have a fixed opinion before the first election dollar is spent.

Who are these swing voters? It would be nice to think that they are sovereign citizens, who weigh the arguments carefully and work towards a responsible decision. Nonsense. They are the people who do not read newspapers, who don't give a damn, who must be dragged to the ballot box. Judging from the ads directed at them, many of them must be morons.

Yet these people decide who will be the next President of the United States of America.

And that's not the end of it. It should not be forgotten that the election may decide the composition of the all-powerful Supreme Court and many other centers of power.

IN ISRAEL, elections are strictly proportional. In the last elections, 33 party lists took part, and 12 passed the 2% threshold.

The next prime minister will not necessarily be the leader of the party with the most votes, but the candidate who can put together a coalition of at least 61 (out of 120) Knesset members.

The real battle in Israel is not between parties but between blocs. Can the left (or "center-left", as they like to call themselves nowadays) reach the magic number of 61?

In practice, Netanyahu has no real competitor at this moment. Not only is there no other leader around who looks even remotely electable, but the present government coalition is composed of forces that will most likely continue to command a majority in the foreseeable future. They are the Likud, all the Orthodox and other religious parties, the settlers and various assorted fascists.

With the enormous birthrate of the Orthodox Jews, this majority will inevitably grow. True, the Muslim Arab birthrate could preserve the demographic balance, but the Arab voters don't count. They are hardly mentioned in the polls, and not at all in any speculation about future coalitions.

¹By the way, Barack Obama's inept performance (the whole thing is a performance, after all) in the first debate was most glaring when Romney sneered at Obama's "green" donors. That should have been the cue for Obama to jump and attack Romney's donors. I suppose Obama was just not listening to his opponent, but thinking about his own next line – always a fatal error in a debate.

tions. Their chronic inability to unite and form a viable political force plays a part in this abject picture.

However, the Arab Members can play an important role in denying Netanyahu a majority, in the unlikely event of the forces being equal.

SO HOW about the leftist bloc?

At the moment, they present a sorry sight. Until now, they came together at least once a year, when the large memorial rally for Yitzhak Rabin was held at the place where he was assassinated, now called Rabin Square.

This year, there are two separate memorial demonstrations at the same place, a week apart.

One of them is the traditional rally. Generally, a hundred thousand people come together to mourn for Rabin and peace. The meeting is strictly “non-political” and non-party, speeches are wishy-washy, “extremist” talk is frowned upon, the murderers and their supporters are mentioned with caution, there is a lot of talking (and singing) about Peace, without much substance. Social affairs are not mentioned at all.

The other planned rally is held by unofficial supporters of the Labor Party, now headed by Shelly Yachimovich. They will talk a lot about social injustice and “swinish capitalism”, but talk about the occupation and the settlers is banned. Peace will be mentioned, if at all, as an empty slogan.

Yachimovich, a 52-year old former radio journalist, has seen her party grow under her stewardship, from a pitiful remnant to a respectable 20 seats according to the polls. She has achieved this by studiously avoiding any talk about peace, since peace has become a four-letter word (in Hebrew). She has expressed sympathy for the settlers and the Orthodox, accepting the occupation as a fact of life. Under pressure, she has paid lip-service to the Two-State Solution, making it clear that utopian things like that do not really interest her.

Her sole aim is to fight for social justice. Her enemies are the tycoons, her flag is social-democratic. She does not mention the fact that the immense sums needed for any meaningful social change are squandered on the huge military budget, the settlements and the Orthodox parasites who do not work.

In the past, the Israeli Left used to boast that they car-

ried two flags: Peace and Social Justice. Now we are left with two Lefts: one which carries the flag of Peace without Social Justice, and one which carries the flag of Social Justice without Peace.

I don't like Yachimovich's strategy, but at least she has one. It can be defended on sheer pragmatic grounds. If, by concentrating solely on social affairs and ignoring the occupation, she could garner votes from the rightist bloc and enlarge the leftist one, it could be a justifiable ploy.

But is it a tactic? Or does it reflect her real convictions? There can be no doubt that she is sincere in her single-minded devotion to social justice, her activities in the Knesset vouch for that. Can the same be said about her devotion to peace, which she expresses only under pressure?

YACHIMOVICH IS hardly the only pretender to the leftist throne. Everybody can see that there is a huge black hole on the left side of the political map, and many are eager to fill it.

Ehud Olmert, just convicted on a minor charge and still under several indictments for corruption, hints that he is itching to come back. So does Aryeh Deri, who has already served his prison term for corruption and wants to supplant the racist Eli Yishai. Tzipi Livni, the inept former Kadima leader, also wants back. Ya'ir Lapid, the handsome TV star, who has the enviable knack of sounding convincing without saying anything, has founded a new party, called “There is a Future”, and sees a rosy future - for himself. Daphni Leef, last year's hero of the social rebellion, speaks about a new extra-parliamentary uprising, but may perhaps be convinced to become parliamentary after all. And so forth.

A determined dreamer may hope for all these forces to unite and take power away from Netanyahu, in accordance with Helmut von Moltke's famous military maxim: “March separately, fight jointly”. However, I would not bet on it. The chances in Sheldon Adelson's Macao casino look better.

SO WHAT will it be, come next spring? Obama with Netanyahu, Romney with Netanyahu, either of them with somebody else?

As the hackneyed phrase goes: “Time will tell.”