

Operetta in 5 Acts

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THE MASTER MAGICIAN has drawn another rabbit from his top hat. A real and very lively rabbit. He has confounded everybody, including the leaders of all parties, the top political pundits and his own cabinet ministers.

He has also shown that in politics, everything can change – literally – overnight.

At 2 a.m. the Knesset was busy putting the finishing touches to a law to dissolve itself – condemning half of its members to political oblivion.

At 3 a.m. there was a huge new government coalition. No elections, thank you very much.

An operetta in 5 acts.

ACT ONE: Everything tranquil. Public opinion polls show Binyamin Netanyahu in absolute control. His popularity is approaching 50%; nobody else's even approaches 20%.

The largest party in the Knesset, Kadima, sinks in the polls from 28 seats to 11, with all indications that it will continue to fall. Its new leader, former Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, gets even less points as candidate for Prime Minister.

Netanyahu could sun himself on the roof of his luxury villa and contemplate the future with equanimity. All is well in the best of all Jewish states.

ACT TWO: Sudden clouds darken the sky.

The Supreme Court, headed by a new president hand-picked by the settlers and the extreme right, hands down a decision: a new neighborhood in Bet-El settlement has to be demolished within two weeks. No ifs and buts, this is a final decision. Also, another settlement, Migron, has to be gone in two months.

Netanyahu is faced with several disastrous possibilities: carry out the court's order, which would break up his coalition, enact a new law that would circumvent the court and be unconstitutional, or ignore the court altogether, which would mark the end of democracy in the Only Democracy in the Middle East.

Like in the book of Job, disaster follows disaster. The term of the temporary law that excuses Orthodox yeshiva students from military service – about 7000 this year – has come to an end, and an overwhelming majority in the country demands its abolition altogether. That would inevitably break up the coalition.

And then something incredible happens. Netanyahu arrives at the inaugural meeting of the new Likud convention. This convention is traditionally a rough and tumultuous scene, resembling the Roman arena in ancient times. Netanyahu is a master of these assemblies. This time, too, he is warmly received and, on live TV, proclaims to the nation the fabulous achievements of his 3-year-old government. He then asks to be elected convention chairman, which would give him control over the candidates' list in the next elections.

Then the really unbelievable happens. Half the members in the hall jump up and start shouting at him. Like Nicolae Ceausescu on a memorable occasion, Netanyahu stares at his underlings uncomprehendingly.

It appears that in the recent Likud registration drive, the settlers made a concerted effort to stuff the party with their people. These have no intention of ever voting for the Likud (they vote for the more extreme Right) but want to blackmail Netanyahu. Coming early, they pack the much-too-small hall in which the convention takes place. Since they all wear a kippah, they are easily recognizable. They shout demands for the election of the chairman by secret ballot. Netanyahu surrenders and the convention is postponed.

Smarting from this public humiliation, Netanyahu swears revenge.

ACT THREE: Out of the blue, Netanyahu announces his decision to dissolve the Knesset and call a quick general election.

Everybody flabbergasted. It is still a year and a half before the end of the legislative term. In a comic reversal, it is the opposition leaders who object to the election, but Netanyahu is determined.

The outlook is bleak: a Netanyahu landslide is inevitable. There is no credible candidate to compete for the prime minister's office. Kadima is about to disappear almost entirely. Expected small gains by Labor are unimportant. In the polls, Yair Lapid's new party (to be called "There is a Future") is hovering around 10%. In the next Knesset, there will be no effective opposition at all.

For the Left, it looks like an unmitigated disaster – four more years of the Rightist-Orthodox-settler coalition.

ACT FOUR: envied by all, assured of a landslide victory, Netanyahu is in a black mood.

He is obliged to remove the settlements in the middle of the election campaign. In his own party, the extreme right, led by the settlers, is gaining strength, jeopardizing his pretension of leading the party towards the center. The time bomb of the Orthodox army service shirkers can explode any moment.

And then in a flash comes the stunning idea – something that will pull the rug from under the feet of everybody else and form an entire new political landscape.

Somewhere around, there lie 28 unused Kadima Knesset members, headed by a hungry ex-general. All of them are faced with political oblivion. They can be bought for next to nothing – just giving them another year and a half of political life is quite enough.

Lo and behold, while one set of Likudniks are still laboring in a Knesset committee finalizing the law for the dispersal of the Knesset, another set of Likudniks are signing an agreement with Kadima. The enlarged coalition will encompass 75% of the Knesset. Nobody in the existing coalition is leaving, 28 new

members are joining. That leaves the opposition with just 26 members (8 Labor, 3 Meretz, 7 Arab parties, 4 Communists, 4 National Front).

ACT FIVE: This changes the picture completely. The extreme right wing, outside and inside the Likud, have lost their veto power. So have the religious parties. Yair Lapid, the promising shining torch (that's what his name means) is being extinguished before he really ignited.

During the next year and a half, Netanyahu can do whatever he wants, play one against another, maneuver at will. The Leftist opposition is even more powerless than before, if that is possible. King Bibi rules supreme.

End (for the time being.)

AT THE first moment, some feared that the entire exercise was directed against Iran.

Governments of National Unity are generally set up in times of war. Britain in 1939, Israel in 1967. But, like almost all the generals and ex-generals, Mofaz has unequivocally rejected an attack on Iran. However, he changes his opinions more frequently than his socks.

As the argument goes, the opportunity is there. An overwhelming Knesset majority will support any decision of Netanyahu's. Barack Obama, in the middle of his crucial reelection campaign, will not dare to object. The Republicans will support Netanyahu through thick and thin.¹

However, it can be said with near certainty that Netanyahu's move had nothing to do with Iran – though its anti-hero is Iranian-born. Mofaz may not look much like a general, but he

does look and move like a merchant in the bazaar.

American party politicians of either side may sound irresponsible, but when vital US security interests are at stake, their talk is not reflected in action. Even at the height of an election campaign, America will not allow Israel to push it into a world-wide disaster.

Netanyahu sounds more and more like a man resigned to this reality. No war in sight. During the whole operetta, Iran was hardly mentioned. No smoking gun in the first act.

MOST PUNDITS and politicians on the left condemned the Netanyahu-Mofaz pact as something odious. "Dirty trick" was one of the more moderate terms used.

I am not a partner to this outcry. Dirty tricks are the usual trade of politicians, and this one is no dirtier than many others.

On the whole, the extended government is more moderate and less exposed to the blackmail of the settlers and the Orthodox than the smaller one was. Fascist laws may have less chance of being passed. The position of the Supreme Court may be less endangered. As of November, a reelected Obama may exert real pressure for peace.

But the main thing is that the elections have been postponed. It is up to the partisans of peace and social justice to use the time gained to put together a real political force, ready for the test. After having peered into the face of near-certain electoral disaster, they must now get together and prepare themselves for the fight. There is a chance, it must not be squandered.

AND IF there is somebody out there who wants to set the libretto of the operetta to music – he or she is very welcome.

¹This is an established strategic assumption in Israel. Many risky Israeli initiatives have been timed for the eve of US elections. The state was founded in 1948 when Harry Truman was fighting for his political life. The 1956 Sinai war was started when Dwight D. Eisenhower was in the middle of his reelection campaign. This ploy, by the way, misfired – Eisenhower was furious and did not need Jewish votes and money. He drove Israel out of its newly acquired territories.