

Weimar Revisited

Uri Avnery

November 19, 2011

“**Y**OU AND YOUR WEIMAR!” a friend of mine once exclaimed in exasperation, “*just because you experienced the collapse of the Weimar Republic as a child, you see Weimar behind every corner.*”

The accusation was not unjustified. In 1960, during the Eichmann trial, I wrote a book about the fall of the German Republic. Its last chapter was called: “It can happen here” Since then I have come back to this warning time and again.

But now I am not alone anymore. During the last few weeks, the word Weimar has popped up in the articles of many commentators.

It should be sprayed in huge letters on the walls.

ISRAELI DEMOCRACY is under siege. No one can ignore this anymore. It is the main topic in the Knesset, which is leading the attack, and the media, who are among the victims.

This does not happen in the occupied territories. There, democracy never existed. Occupation is the very opposite of democracy: a denial of all human rights, the right to life, liberty, movement, fair trial and free expression, not to mention national rights.

No, I mean Israel proper, the Israel inside the Green Line, The Only Democracy In The Middle East.

The attackers are members of Binyamin Netanyahu’s government coalition, which includes semi-fascist and openly fascist elements. Netanyahu himself tries to remain discreetly in the background, but there can be no doubt that every single detail has been orchestrated by him.

In the first two years of this coalition, attacks were sporadic. But now they are determined, systematic and coordinated.

At this moment, the anti-democratic forces are attacking on a wide front, The three main pillars of democracy – the courts, the media and the human rights organizations – are under simultaneous, deadly assault. Remember Weimar?

THE SUPREME COURT is the bastion of democracy. Israel has no constitution, the Knesset majority is totally unbridled, only the court can (if reluctantly) check the adoption of anti-democratic laws.

I am not a blind admirer of the court. In the occupied territories, it is an arm of the occupation, devoted to “national security”, approving of some of the worst incidents. Only in rare cases has it come out against the worst practices. But in Israel proper, it is a stout defender of civil rights.

The extreme rightists in the Knesset are resolved to put an end to this. Their front man is the Minister of Justice, who was appointed by Avigdor Lieberman. He is pushing a series of scandalous ad hominem bills. One of them is designed to change the composition of the public committee that appoints the judges, with the undisguised intention of bringing about the appointment of a particular right-wing judge to the Supreme

Court.

Another bill has the undisguised purpose of changing the existing court rules in order to put a certain “conservative” judge in the chair of Chief Justice. The declared purpose is to abolish the rule of an independent court which dares, though only in rare cases, to block “anti-constitutional” laws enacted by the Knesset majority. They want the court to “represent the will of the people”. Remember Weimar?

Until now, since the first day of the state, the justices have been, in practice, chosen by cooptation. This has functioned perfectly for 63 years. Israel’s Supreme Court is the envy of many countries. Now this system is in mortal danger.

Another bill, which would have compelled candidates for the Supreme Court to undergo grilling by a Knesset Committee chaired by another Lieberman appointee, and obtain their approval, was withheld at the last moment by Netanyahu himself. He had already given his approval, but shrank back after the almost universal condemnation – and is now posing as the defender of democracy from his own underlings.

The chairman of the Judicial Committee of the Knesset, another Lieberman appointee, is rushing these laws through his committee, contrary to established procedures. In a stormy session this week, a female member called him “a coarse thug”. He replied: “*You are not even a beast.*”

A minimal purpose of these bills is to terrorize any judges considering vetoing the other anti-democratic bills that are being enacted. Some say that the effects are already being felt.

In several famous cases, the government openly flouts the Supreme Court’s orders, especially concerning the evacuation of “settlements outposts” built on lands belonging to Palestinian farmers.

Who will defend the court? The former Chief Justice, Aharon Barak, who was hated by the rightists because of his pioneering “judicial activism”, once told me: “*The Court has no army divisions. Its power rests solely on the support of the public.*”

THE ASSAULT on the media started some time ago when the American casino baron, Sheldon Adelson, a close friend of Netanyahu, started a daily tabloid paper with the express purpose of helping Netanyahu. It is being distributed for free and now has the biggest circulation in the country, threatening the existence of all the others (but also bribing them by giving them huge printing orders.) Money is no object. Huge sums are being spent.

That was only the beginning.

In 1965 the Labor party government enacted a new libel law (called literally “the Law of the Evil Tongue”) which was then clearly designed to muzzle “Haolam Hazeh”, the mass-circulation news magazine I was editing, which had introduced investigative reporting to Israel. I appealed to the public to

send me to the Knesset in protest, and 1.5% of the voters were incensed enough to do so.

Now the right-wing gang in the Knesset wants to sharpen this anti-media law even more. The new amendment grants up to \$135,000 damages to anyone claiming to be hurt by the media, without their having to prove any damage at all. For newspapers and TV channels, which are already in a precarious financial position, this means that they better give up all investigative reporting and any criticism of influential politicians and tycoons.

The new winds are already being felt. Journalists and TV editors are cowed. This week, a program on Channel 10, considered the most liberal, gave five minutes to a song glorifying the late "Rabbi" Meir Kahane, who was branded by the Supreme Court as a fascist, and whose organization was outlawed for advocating what the court called "Nuremberg laws". An avowed member of this organization, which is alive and kicking under another name, is now a vocal member of the Knesset. Remember Weimar?

A major purge of TV journalists is already underway. One by one, directors of all TV channels are being replaced by confirmed rightists. It was openly admitted that the government would force the closure of Channel 10 by calling in outstanding debts if a certain journalist were not fired. Though generally an establishment type, this reporter had irked Netanyahu by exposing his and his wife's luxurious traveling style at government expense.

AT THE same time, human rights and peace NGOs are under heavy attack. The Knesset gang is producing bill after bill to silence them.

One bill already under way forbids human rights associations to receive donations from foreign governments and "state-like organizations", such as the UN and the EU. Right-wing organizations receive, of course, huge sums of money from Jewish American billionaires, who fund the settlements (which are also indirectly financed by the US treasury, which gives tax-exempt status to the so-called "charitable organizations" that fund the settlements.)

The law which levies huge indemnities on organizations and individuals who advocate a boycott on the products of the settlements is already in force. The hearing of an application submitted by Gush Shalom to the Supreme Court against this suppression of political protest has been postponed by the court again and again and again.

This parliamentary terrorism is accompanied by the accelerating violence of fascist gangs from the settlements. These SA-like gangs call their actions "Price Tag". Usually, they react to the isolated cases of the army demolishing a few "illegal" buildings in a settlement by attacking a neighboring Palestinian village, setting fire to a mosque or carrying out what can only be described as a pogrom. Remember Weimar?

MARTIN NIEMÖLLER, a German U-boat captain and later pacifist pastor, who was thrown into a concentration camp by the Nazis, coined the famous lament: "*When the Nazis came to take the Communists, I was silent. After all, I was no Communist. When they took the Jews, I was silent. I am no Jew. When they arrested the Social Democrats, I was silent. I was no Social Democrat. When they came to take me, there was no one left to protest.*"

What we are witnessing now are not isolated attacks on one or another human right – what we are seeing is a general attack on democracy as such. Perhaps only people who have experienced life under a fascist dictatorship can fully realize what that means.

Of course, the similarity between the collapse of the German republic and the processes in today's Israel does not mean that the same events must follow. Nazism was unique in many ways. The end of real democracy may be followed by different systems. There are many models to choose from: Ceausescu, Franco, Putin.

Certainly, there is no similarity between the small German town called Weimar and Tel Aviv. Except perhaps the fact that many houses in Tel Aviv were designed according to the Bauhaus architectural school - which originated in Weimar.

Weimar was once a cultural center, where geniuses like Goethe and Schiller produced their masterpieces. The German republic which was founded in 1919, after World War I, was called by this name after the national assembly which framed its very progressive constitution there.

On these lines, the endangered democratic State of Israel, whose Declaration of Independence was signed in 1948 in Tel Aviv, could rightly be called the Tel Aviv Republic.

We are not yet in 1932. The Storm Troopers are not yet roaming our streets. We still have time to mobilize the public against the looming danger. The demonstration taking place today in Tel Aviv against the de-democratization of Israel may mark a turning point.