

Weird Elections

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IN A FEW hundred years, a professor looking for an especially esoteric subject will ask his students to research the Israeli elections of 2013.

The students will come back with a unanimous report: the results of our research are incredible.

Faced with at least three grave dangers, they report, Israeli parties and voters just ignored them. As if joined in a conspiracy, they tacitly agreed among themselves not to talk about them. Instead, they bickered and quarreled about totally insignificant and irrelevant issues.

ONE REMARKABLE fact was that the elections were called early—they were not due till November 2013—because of the Prime Minister’s declared inability to obtain Knesset approval for the annual state budget.

The proposed budget was shaped by the fact that the state had developed a huge deficit, which made drastic measures inevitable. Taxes had to be raised dramatically and social services had to be cut even more than during the last four years of Binyamin Netanyahu’s stewardship.¹

For comparison: the recent elections in the United States were also held in the shadow of a severe fiscal crisis. Two basic conceptions about the solution were presented by the antagonists, the main debate was about the deficit, taxes and the social services. This went on even after the elections and a kind of compromise was achieved just in time to avert national bankruptcy.

Nothing of the kind in Israel. There was no debate at all.

True, the Labor Party, expected to garner about 15% of the vote, indeed came out with a grandiose economic plan for the next years, composed by an assortment of university professors. However, this plan was quite irrelevant to the crucial problem facing the state on the day after the elections: How to stop the hole of tens of billions of shekels in the 2013 budget.

The Likud did not say a word about the budget which it had intended to present to the Knesset. Neither did the Labor Party mention it, nor any of the other dozen or so parties that were competing.

When we put our ballot papers into the ballot box,

¹This, by the way, did not deter Netanyahu from making election speeches about the Israeli economy being in excellent condition, far superior to the economies of the major Western countries.

²Including my own application to annul the law that levies huge penalties on anyone advocating a boycott of the products of the settlements. The case “Avnery v. the State of Israel” has been postponed again and again.

what are we voting for? For higher taxes, surely. But taxes on whom? Will the rich pay more, or will the fabled “middle class” pay more? What will be cut—aid to the disabled, the sick, the old, the unemployed? What about the immense military budget? The settlements? Is Israel going to lose its favorable international credit rating? Are we going to slide into a severe recession?

It is obvious why no party wants to go into details—any serious proposal would cause it to lose votes. But we, the people—why do we let them get away with it? Why don’t we demand answers? Why do we accept fatuous generalities, which no one takes seriously?

Riddle No. 1.

ISRAEL IS faced with a severe constitutional crisis—if such a term is applicable to a state without a constitution.

The ODME (“*Only Democracy in the Middle East*”) is threatened from within, along a wide front.

The most immediate danger faces the Supreme Court, the strongest remaining bastion of what was once a flourishing democracy. The court tries—rather timidly—to resist the most egregious actions and bills of the right-wing Knesset majority. Applications to the court to annul glaringly anti-democratic legislation are postponed for years.²

But even this timid—some would say cowardly—performance of the Supreme Court arouses the fury of the right-wingers. Naftali Bennett, the leader of the fastest rising party in these elections (up from 6% to 12% in a few weeks) promises to stuff the court with his favorites.

Israeli judges are appointed by a committee, in which sitting judges play a major role. Bennett and his allies in the Likud want to change the rules, so that rightist politicians will choose the judges. His declared aim: to put an end to “judicial activism”, deprive the Supreme Court of the power to annul anti-democratic laws and block administrative decisions, such as those about building settlements on private Palestinian land.

The Israeli media are already to a large extent neutralized, a creeping process not unsimilar to what the Germans used to call Gleichschaltung.

All three TV channels are more or less bankrupt and

dependent on government handouts. Their editors are practically government appointees. The printed press is also teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, except the largest “news” paper, which belongs to Sheldon Adelson and is a Netanyahu propaganda sheet, distributed gratis. Bennett repeats the ridiculous assertion that almost all journalists are left-wingers (meaning traitors.) He promises to put an end to this intolerable situation.

Bennett’s assertions are only slightly more extreme than those of the Likud and the religious parties.

In the annual gathering of the heads of Israel’s diplomatic missions in the world, a very senior diplomat asked why the government had announced the building of a huge new settlement in East Jerusalem, a decision denounced throughout the world. The question was loudly applauded by the diplomats. Netanyahu’s spokesman, until recently the most senior Orthodox kippa-wearing army officer, curtly told the diplomats to resign if they have problems with government policy.

A few weeks ago, the commanding general in the occupied West Bank decided to elevate the status of the college in the Ariel settlement to the rank of a university. It may be the only university in the world which was given its charter by an army general.

There is, of course, not the slightest sign of democracy or human rights in the occupied territories. The Likud threatens to cut off international funding to all the NGOs which try to monitor what is happening there.

Does this process of de-democratization evoke a furious debate in these elections? Not at all, just a few feeble protests. The issue is not a vote-catcher.

That’s riddle No. 2

BUT THE most puzzling riddle concerns the most dangerous threat: the question of peace and war. It has almost completely disappeared from the election campaign.

Tzipi Livni has adopted negotiations with the Palestinians as a kind of election gimmick—without emotions, avoiding the word “peace” as far as possible. All other parties, with the exception of the small Meretz and Hadash, don’t mention it at all.

In the coming four years, the official annexation of the West Bank to Israel may become a fact. Palestinians may be confined to small enclaves, the West Bank may be filled

with many more settlements, a violent intifada may break out, Israel may be isolated in the world, even the crucial American support may weaken.

If the government continues on its present course, this will lead to certain disaster—the entire country between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River will become one unit under Israeli rule. This Greater Israel will contain an Arab majority and a shrinking Jewish minority, turning it inevitably into an apartheid state, plagued by a permanent civil war and shunned by the world.

If pressure from without and within eventually compels the government to grant civil rights to the Arab majority, the country will turn into an Arab state. 134 years of Zionist endeavor will come to nought, a repetition of the Crusaders’ kingdom.

This is so obvious, so inevitable, that one needs an iron will not to think about it. It seems that all major parties in these elections have this will. Speaking about peace, they believe, is poison. Giving back the West Bank and East Jerusalem for peace? God forbid even thinking about it.

The weird fact is that this week two respected polls— independent of each other—came to the same conclusion: the great majority of Israeli voters favors the “two-state solution”, the creation of a Palestinian state along the 1967 borders and the partition of Jerusalem. This majority includes the majority of Likud voters, and even about half of Bennett’s adherents.

How come? The explanation lies in the next question: How many voters believe that this solution is possible? The answer: almost nobody. Over dozens of years, Israelis have been brainwashed into believing that “the Arabs” don’t want peace. If they say they do, they are lying.

If peace is impossible, why think about it? Why even mention it in the election campaign? Why not go back 44 years to Golda Meir’s days and pretend that the Palestinians don’t exist?³

So that’s riddle No. 3.

THE STUDENTS in a few hundred years time may well come to the conclusion: “*Those Israeli elections were really weird, especially considering what happened in the following years. We have found no reasonable explanation.*”

The professor will sadly shake his head.

³ “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people. . . It is not as though there was a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away. They did not exist.”—Golda Meir, June 13, 1969