

The Plebiscite

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ISRAELIS ARE FED up with Binyamin Netanyahu. They are fed up with the government. They are fed up with all political parties. They are fed up with themselves. They are fed up.

That is the reason for the disintegration of the government this week. It did not fall because of any particular issue. Certainly not because of irrelevant matters like peace and war, occupation, racism, democracy and nonsense like that.

Curiously enough, this has happened to Netanyahu once before. His first government disintegrated in 1999, and the whole country breathed an audible sigh of relief. Indeed, the general feeling was of liberation, as if a foreign invader had finally been expelled. Like Paris in 1944.

In 2000, in the evening after the election, when it was announced that Netanyahu had been defeated, there was an explosion of enthusiasm. Tens of thousands of delirious citizens streamed spontaneously to Tel Aviv's central Rabin Square and cheered the savior, Ehud Barak, the leader of the Labor Party. He announced the Dawn of Another Day.

Unfortunately, Barak turned out to be a sociopath and an egomaniac, if not a megalomaniac. He missed the chance of peace at the Camp David conference and in the process almost completely destroyed the Israeli peace movement. The Right, this time under Ariel Sharon, came back. Then under Ehud Olmert. Then under Netanyahu again. And Again.

And now again?

God forbid!

SO WHY did the government break up this week?

No special reason. The ministers were just fed up with each other, and all were fed up with "Bibi".

Ministers started to besmirch each other, and Netanyahu. The Prime Minister, in his turn, accused his ministers, one by one, of incompetence and sinister conspiracies against him. In his parting speech, Netanyahu accused his finance minister, Yair Lapid, of failure—as if he, the prime minister, had nothing to do with it.

The public looked on as an amused or bemused bystander. As if the whole mess did not concern it.

Now we have new elections.

At this moment it looks as if we are doomed to have a

fourth Netanyahu government, even worse than the third, more racist, more anti-democratic, more anti-peace.

Unless.

THREE WEEKS ago, when nobody yet anticipated the imminent breakup, I wrote an article in Haaretz. The title was "A National Emergency Government".

My argument is that the Netanyahu government is leading the country towards disaster. It is systematically destroying all chances for peace, enlarging settlements in the West Bank and especially East Jerusalem, stoking the fires of a religious war on the Temple Mount/Noble Sanctuary, denouncing both Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas at the same time. All this after the superfluous Gaza War, which ended in a military draw and a human disaster that continues unabated to this day.

At the same time, the government is bombarding the Knesset with an endless stream of racist and anti-democratic bills, each worse than the last, culminating in the bill called "Israel: the Nation-State of the Jewish People", which eliminates the term "Jewish and Democratic State" as well as the word "Equality".

At the same time, Netanyahu is quarreling with the US administration, severely damaging a relationship that is the lifeline of Israel in all matters, while Europe is slowly but surely approaching sanctions against Israel.

At the same time, social inequality in Israel, already enormous keeps on widening; prices in Israel are higher than in Europe, housing almost unaffordable.

With this government we are galloping towards a racist apartheid state, both in Israel proper and the occupied territories, heading towards disaster.

IN THIS emergency, I wrote, we cannot afford the usual squabbling between little left-wing and centrist parties, each of which does not even come near to endangering the right-wing coalition in power. In a national emergency, we need emergency measures.

We need to create a united election bloc of all centrist and leftist parties, leaving nobody out, if possible including the Arab parties.

I KNOW that that this is a Herculean task. There are large ideological differences between these parties, not to mention party interests and the egos of leaders, which play a huge role in ordinary times. But these are not ordinary

times.

I did not propose that the parties dissolve and merge into one big party. That, I am afraid, is impossible at this point in time. It is, at least, premature. What is proposed is a temporary alliance, based on a general platform of peace, democracy, equality and social justice.

If the Arab political forces can join this alignment, that would be wonderful. If the time is not yet ripe, the Arab citizens could create a parallel unified bloc, linked to the Jewish one.

The declared purpose of the bloc should be to put an end to the catastrophic drift of the country towards the abyss and to oust not just Netanyahu, but the whole bunch of settlers, nationalist and racist demagogues, war-mongers and religious zealots. It should appeal to all sectors of Israeli society, women and men, Jews and Arabs, Orientals and Ashkenazis, secular and religious, Russian and Ethiopian immigrants. All those who fear for the future of Israel and are resolved to save it.

The call should be addressed first of all to the existing parties—the Labor Party and Meretz, Yair Lapid's "There is a Future" and Tzipi Livni's "The Movement", as well as the new party-in-the-making of Moshe Kahlon, the communist Hadash and the Arab parties. It should also ask for the support of all the peace and human rights organizations.

In the political annals of Israel there is an example. When Ariel Sharon left the army in 1973 (after concluding that his peers would never allow him to become Chief of Staff) he created the Likud by uniting Menachem Begin's Freedom Party, the Liberals and two small splinter parties.

I asked him about the sense of this. The Freedom and Liberal parties were already united in a joint Knesset faction, the two tiny parties were doomed anyhow.

"You don't understand," he replied. "The important thing is to convince the voters that the entire right-wing is now united, with nobody left out."

Begin was far from enthusiastic. But strong public pressure was exerted on him, and he became the leader. In 1977, after eight straight election defeats, he became prime minister.

DOES A center-left alignment now have a chance of success? I strongly believe that it does.

Very large numbers of Israelis, both Jewish and Arab, have despaired of the political process altogether. They despise all politicians and parties, seeing only corruption,

cynicism and self-interest. Others believe that the victory of the right-wing is inevitable. The dominant sentiment is of fatalism, apathy, What Can We Do?

A big new alignment carries the message: Yes, We Can. All together, we can halt the carriage and turn it around, before it reaches the cliff. We can turn bystanders into activists. We can turn non-voters into voters. Masses of them.

REMAINS THE question: who will be No. 1 on the joint election list?

This is a huge problem. Politicians have large egos. None of them will easily give up his or her ambition. I know. I have been through this three times in my life, and I had to contend with my own ego.

Also, the personality of No. 1 has a disproportional impact on the voting public.

Let's face it: at the moment there is no outstanding personality around who would be the natural choice.

A simple and democratic way is to establish the priority by public opinion polls. Let the most popular win.

Another method is to hold open, public primaries. Anyone who declares that they are going to vote for the list will cast a ballot. There are other ways, too.

It would be a tragedy of historic dimensions if petty ambitions were to cost us victory.

IN THE last few days, identical and similar calls have been published. There is a growing demand for a united National Salvation Front.

In order for this vision to come true, public pressure is needed. We have to overcome the hesitation of the politicians. We need a steady stream of public demands, petitions by well-known and respected cultural, political, economic and military personalities, as well as by citizens from all walks of life. Hundreds. Thousands.

These coming elections must turn into a national plebiscite, a clear choice between two very different Israeli states:

A racist Israel of inequality, engaged in an endless war and increasingly subject to the rule of fundamentalist rabbis.

Or a democratic Israel that seeks peace with Palestine and the entire Arab and Muslim world and equality between all citizens, irrespective of sex, nation, religion, language and community.

In such a contest, I believe that we shall win.