

Civil Unrest and National Transformation

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The results of Israel's November 2022 democratic elections brought about an absolute parliamentary majority for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition of fellow right-wing, nationalist parties, while at the same time involving losses for Israel's left-wing camp. The Left declines to accept the new political reality as it fears major changes in the economic and bureaucratic fields, which it has managed to avoid despite the official political shift to the right when Menachem Begin came to power in 1977.

Taking to the streets to unleash near-violent protests, which ultimately morphed into full-blown riots, the organized and well-funded civil unrest included numerous acts of arson as well as verbal and even physical attacks on elected members of Knesset and ruling coalition ministers and their families. Despite having "anyone but Bibi" as the primary goal of their campaign, they needed a more marketable cause célèbre with which to enrage the public and therefore picked one plank of Netanyahu's platform, judicial reform, as their main theme. In disregard of the monumental judicial revolution wrought by Aharon Barak, which imposed a brand of judicial activism unheard of in most democracies exercising separation of powers, the anti-judicial Reform revolutionaries in the streets adopted the battle cry of "Democracy!" thereby implying that right-wingers are dictatorial.

Not Just Political

Although on the surface, the tension appears to be a contest of Left versus Right, upon closer examination, what is happening in Israel's streets, highways, commerce, and industry is an alignment of underlying social and ethnic divisions that have been simmering since the State was founded. The domination of Israeli politics, labor

movements, academia, judiciary, police, and media by Israel's Left was essentially regarded as a de facto founding principle—not unlike the Soviet system whereby the state, the party, and labor were all melded into one power base.

To get a job in 1950s Israel, one had to be a member of the national labor union, Histadrut. For practical purposes, that meant being a member of the “perpetually” ruling Labor Party, which in turn meant one had to be an Israeli of East European (Ashkenazic) descent. Jews immigrating from Arab countries (Sephardim) were marginalized and were never really part of the political and social opportunity equation until 1977.

Breaking the traditional disregard of Sephardim as a recognizable segment of the electorate—and of the Israeli population in general—Menachem Begin reached out and empowered them. By including them in his political base, he broke the hold that the Labor Party had had over Israeli politics for the first time in 29 years since the State's founding, not to mention 60 years of a socialist takeover of the Zionist movement. For the Left, Begin's election as prime minister was viewed as a mere aberration, a fluke to be corrected next time around.

After several election victories by Netanyahu's Likud and its coalition partners, the Left, correctly reading the new political tea leaves, feel threatened. Israel's majority wants nationalist and a religiously sensitive leadership as opposed to the entrenched, socialist, secularist old guard. One need only observe the nightly news in Israel to see that the very makeup of the masses protesting and rioting over judicial reform are overwhelmingly Ashkenazic secularists born and raised on left-wing secular ideology.

Judicial reform is, in fact, a fig leaf for the underlying social, ethnic, and religious divide that has finally come to the fore after simmering for 70 years. The Left knows that the right-wing genie is never going to go back into the bottle, and it has therefore turned to the tactics of its forebears—violence, civil unrest, and the call for revolution by its mouthpieces, such as former prime ministers Ehud Barak, Ehud Olmert, and Yair Lapid—all of which present dubious political success.

Repercussions after the Fall

The fall of Israel's old guard is having, and will continue to have, far-reaching ramifications in all spheres of public life. However, in the defense establishment, the current crisis carries a potential blessing. The Israeli military is not just a defense institution like those of any other country; rather, it is interwoven with the very fabric of Israeli society, having been instituted as part of crafting "the New Jew," "the Fighting Jew" who would never again go into a gas chamber. To enlist in the IDF was seen as not only a badge of honor, but a national duty, binding upon every son of Israel since its establishment.

However, in the past decades, this commitment has been eroded, and personal gratification has replaced much of the ideological commitment. In the IDF, as well as other defense branches, the intelligence arms, and more specifically, the technological departments, provided prestige with no physical risk together with a career in a lucrative future hi-tec company. The rejected minorities, such as Sephardic Jews from the periphery of Israel and national-religious youth, crowded the special forces units and the officer training courses.

The impact of calculated "refusal to serve" couldn't have come at a better time. Just like human beings, organizations abhor change and are willing to undergo the painful process usually when faced with catastrophe. A change means shifts in the organization and general uncertainty where one is now placed in the organizational chart.

In the case of the IDF and all other defense branches, it will affect elements such as the need to diversify their commander's corps, which in turn would introduce new thought patterns and approaches to problem-solving. Fresh blood will mean discarding old political and commercial interests that stagnated in a vicious circle of political and ethnic "old boys" networks. In addition to functional qualifications, the structural changes would include ideological commitment to the elected government institutions would also undoubtedly be factored in.