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THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS PARTY: ISRAEL'S THIRD PARTY

by Shmuel Sandler

Though a component of every government in Israel since the founding of the State, the National Religious Party has never been the dominant partner in any of the successive coalitions which have ruled after 1948. Now, however, in the present circumstances, there is reason to believe that the NRP may be able to establish itself as a viable alternative in the eyes of the electorate at large. Consequently, it is worth examining the role of the NRP, the nation's third largest party, in Israel's political fabric.

For years it was an acknowledged fact that the lack of an alternative helped sustain Mapai and later, the Labor Party in power. The militant image of Herut, the second largest party was a significant factor in this respect. Mapai was particularly successful in portraying Herut leaders in general and party chief Menachem Begin in particular as dangerous men who would declare war on the very day that they were elected to office. Thus, despite a latent desire throughout the electorate for a change in government, Mapai-Labor was able to remain in power.

The situation was such that until the 1977 elections, the governing party was able to survive a number of difficulties which in other circumstances might have led to its collapse. One set of problems erupted in the early 1960s when Mapai's charismatic leader, David Ben Gurion, left the party after failing to overcome the entrenched power of its apparatchiks. Later, there were complications which stemmed from the economic hardships of the mid-1960s. Finally, in the short run, at least, Labor survived its mismanagement of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Given the fact that this Mapai-Labor staying power was largely the result of the main opposition's inability to be perceived as a viable alternative, the situation which existed in the period immediately before and after the 1977 elections was especially ironic. In effect, the Likud bloc, dominated almost completely by Herut, was voted into office and then encouraged by a large measure of popular support because Labor was not perceived as a viable alternative. Until early 1978, at least, Herut-Likud was considered to be a strong, effective, and united front while Labor's internal divisions were public knowledge.

Today, however, after two and a half years in power, the Likud (Hebrew for unity) government is in shambles. The Liberal Party, Herut's main partner in the Likud, is torn by bickering, dissent, and a struggle among self-conceived leadership rivals - all triggered by the failure of party chief Simcha Ehrlich, the Minister of Finance, to control inflation. Indeed, even within the party Ehrlich is held personally responsible for the nation's current economic difficulties and his erstwhile lieutenants as well as regular party faithful are openly calling for his ouster from the finance portfolio and the Liberal leadership.

Another faction within the Likud, the small La'am Party, underwent a split in the wake of the Camp David accords. While those who left the party to revive the State List faction are ostensibly members of the Likud bloc, their stance is such that they can hardly be considered stalwart coalition members.

Herut itself has been shaken by unprecedented internal dissension which culminated in the departure of two prominent members of Knesset, Geula Cohen and Moshe Shamir. They have been instrumental in the establishment of a new political body, the Renaissance (Ha-T'chiya) Party.

Finally, the Likud government has had difficulties outside its ranks. The Democratic Movement Party, whose seven Knesset members help the government maintain its legislative majority, is at odds with Herut-Likud on many points of government policy, even while DM leader Yigael Yadin serves as Deputy Prime Minister. From time to time, in fact, the DM threatens to withdraw from the government coalition.\* In addition, the two religious parties (NRP and Agudat Yisrael) which are particularly loyal to the Prime Minister are under increasing internal pressures to extract a number of demands from the government.\*\*

On the opposite side, the situation within the Labor Party is not much better. Though widely accepted as leader for more than two years, Shimon Peres is now being challenged by a new coalition dominated by former Prime Minister and party leader Yitzhak Rabin and former Foreign Minister Yigal Allon. Moreover, various constituent and affiliated groups - party functionaries, the kibbutz movement, the Histadrut Labor Federation and economic institutions among others - are pressing for an increased share of power.

Nevertheless, Labor's main problem is its failure to devise a workable alternative program to deal with the economic situation. Since this issue is uppermost in the minds of the voters, this shortcoming is especially significant. Moreover, many voters still consider that the economic policies of the previous Labor government, particularly as they affected the expansion of the bureaucracy and the power of the trade unions, were largely responsible for the difficult economic situation which exists today.

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\* Likud's original partner in the coalition was known as the Democratic Movement for Change. Subsequently it underwent a split into the Democratic Movement headed by Yadin and Change and Initiative, led by Professor Amnon Rubinstein.

\*\* While both the NRP and Agudat Yisrael are formal coalition partners, the latter refrains from holding government portfolios as a matter of religious conviction.

To the extent that Israel's two main political rivals are beset by serious problems at the same time, an unprecedented situation exists in which each is burdened by significant constraints on its ability to offer itself as a viable alternative to the other. And this fact may have important implications for the National Religious Party.

With 12 members in the 120-seat Knesset, the NRP is Israel's third largest party after Labor and Herut. Compared to the other two, the NRP is by far the most stable. Although it did undergo a period of major internal problems after the death of its long-time leader M. H. Shapira, the party emerged united and strong. While a transfer of power is now under way from the old guard to a younger generation of leaders headed by Education and Culture Minister Zevulun Hammer and Knesset Member Yehuda Ben-Meir, this process is being effected gradually and smoothly - partly, and perhaps even largely, because Interior and Police Minister Dr. Yosef Burg has been maintained as official party leader.

During the past three years, the NRP has been broadening its interests and involvement from strictly religious issues to such matters as education, foreign affairs, and economics, a process that is underscored by several examples. Minister Hammer, for instance, initiated and oversaw the successful Knesset passage of the extension of free tuition to all grades of high school. Moreover, he played a pivotal role in the major shake-up of the Israel broadcasting system which, despite bitter and vocal opposition from the country's left wing, has been widely accepted as an important, positive development.

For his part, Dr. Burg was nominated by Prime Minister Begin to head the Israeli team which is negotiating the question of Palestinian autonomy with Egypt and the United States. Meanwhile, Dr. Ben-Meir, together with Minister Hammer, has been prominent in his efforts to put pressure on Mr. Begin to assume active leadership in economic affairs by reorganizing the government. All these activities, alongside the NRP's efforts to increase the participation of religious people in government positions, especially in the diplomatic field, are clear indications of the expanded role the party is attempting to play in Israel's political life.

Perhaps the party's most important attribute is the fact that, despite its limited power base, the NRP is now the most veteran ruling party in Israel. Since it has been part of almost every coalition government since the inception of the State, the NRP's leaders now constitute the most governmentally-experienced body of politicians in the country. For this reason alone, the NRP is assured of a key position in the next government regardless of which party leads the administration.

By virtue of its participation in coalition governments, the NRP has achieved a position of "king-maker," a fact which prompts even the leadership of the Labor Party to be careful and cordial in its references to the NRP. For its part, the party has been the most loyal of all coalition partners, despite being charged with opportunism by both extreme anti-religious and religious zealot groups throughout Israeli society. As long as the status quo

in religious matters was not affected, the NRP never acted to bring down a government in a time of crisis. Moreover, the NRP demonstrated a commendable degree of national responsibility during the crisis of 1967 when its leaders were among the chief architects of the national unity government, despite the fact that the expansion of the coalition reduced their position in the administration. Later they pressed for the formation of the so-called "wall-to-wall" government in the face of serious external threats. In retrospect, the NRP is entitled to be considered the most stable element in most of Israel's coalition governments, enabling the various administrations to function in such critical fields as national security and economics and preventing a rift between the religious and secular sectors in Israel.

This past and present record, accompanied by the ascendancy of a young and ambitious leadership in the NRP, will probably induce the party to actively seek a new role in Israeli politics. For one thing, the party leadership is convinced that the NRP received a significant number of votes in 1977 from non-Orthodox electors who felt a need to strengthen the tradition and Jewish values for which it stands. On this basis, then, party leaders have recently indicated that they are considering enlarging the NRP's base by opening it to members who, though not strictly Orthodox, are part of the traditional sector of Israeli society. Such a constituency would help enlarge and enhance the party's political base, especially in conjunction with a potential shift in the voting habits of tens of thousands of religious people who tended to vote for secular parties as a result of their stands on issues of non-religious concern. In this setting the political disarray of the two major parties - Likud and Labor - could well facilitate such tendencies on the part of the general electorate.

There are obviously risks in such a transformation. Many voters who voted in the past for the NRP because of their concern about Israel's religious character may hesitate to vote for a diluted religious party. However, experience indicates that the party can succeed in establishing a consensus between ideologically opposing groups. In the 1950s, for example, it overcame an internal struggle between socialist and liberal-oriented sections. In the '60s it succeeded in keeping within the party's framework differing ideological streams centered in the kibbutz movement, on the one hand, and the yeshivot (rabbinical colleges), on the other. Despite the NRP's hawkish image in foreign affairs, the truth of the matter is that its representatives in the Knesset consist of hawks from Gush Emunim, moderates, and even extreme doves. The common denominator of all of these elements, who are satisfied by an efficient distribution of power within the party, is their deep commitment to both religion and Zionism.

What is clear from the current situation is that both the Israeli political system and the NRP are ripe for the emergence of a third major party, which then in turn could replace the Likud in the event of its disintegration after Mr. Begin's departure from national politics. Such an evolution may seem illusory to many political analysts, but for many years the collapse of Labor and subsequent emergence of the Likud seemed to them an absolute impossibility. Such a development, of course, is fraught with many risks and promises, and it may take many years and even several

elections for it to materialize. In any event, though, one thing seems certain: the NRP has the power and the desire to play a major role in general national issues and will not agree to confine itself to solely religious matters in the future.

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