

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

JERUSALEM CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS
REGISTERED AMUTA



המרכז הירושלמי לענייני ציבור ומדינה
עמותה רשומה

No. 388 24 Av 5758 / 16 August 1998

THE LONG HOT ISRAELI SUMMER

David Clayman

The Knesset Votes to Dissolve and Go to New Elections / The Ashkenazi-Sephardi Conflict Revisited / Labor's Failed Attempt at Reconciliation / Who Are the Real Israelis? / Israel's New Power Elite

The Knesset's last day before the summer recess turned out to be a blistering hot and raucous affair. The Labor party's parliamentary finesse in offering a bill to dissolve the Knesset was supposed to be a dramatic demonstration of lack of confidence and support for the Netanyahu government. Their attempt to embarrass the prime minister and his government was overtaken and virtually obliterated by the storm of protest and fury over racist remarks by a senior Labor MK.

Labor opposition leaders had failed earlier in the week to pass a no confidence vote in the Knesset. Their 40 to 20 majority vote expressing no confidence in the government was not enough to bring down the Netanyahu government under the revised election laws. Whereas formerly, a simple majority of those present and voting was sufficient to pass a no confidence vote, under the new regulations a majority of at least 61 of the 120-person house is needed. The opposition then decided to go for passing legislation dissolving the Knesset. Legislation in its preliminary reading, as opposed to a no confidence vote, requires only a simple

majority. However, the drawback of legislation over a no confidence vote is that passage of a law in the Knesset is a lengthy affair.

The Knesset Votes to Dissolve and Go to New Elections

On its last day before the recess, the Knesset passed two bills on a preliminary reading calling for the dissolution of the house and early elections. The bills passed by a 60 to 6 vote with 1 abstention. Most of the coalition boycotted the vote out of the realization that they did not have the votes to match or outdo the opposition. The bills will now be transferred to the Knesset Committee on Constitution, Law and Justice which will prepare them for their first reading at the start of the winter session of the Knesset sometime in October. If the bills pass their first reading, they still have to go through a second and third reading, so that any vote on the actual dissolution of the Knesset will not occur before the end of 1998. If this were to happen, then elections for both the Knesset and the prime minister would have to be held within a

DANIEL J. ELAZAR, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER; ZVI R. MAROM, ASSOCIATE EDITOR; MARK AMI-EL, MANAGING EDITOR. 13 TEL-HAI ST., JERUSALEM, ISRAEL; TEL. 972-2-5619281, FAX. 972-2-5619112, INTERNET: ELAZAR@VMS.HUJI.AC.IL. IN U.S.A.: 1616 WALNUT ST., SUITE 507, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19103; TEL. (215) 204-1459, FAX. (215) 204-7784. © COPYRIGHT. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ISSN: 0792-7304.

THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED BY THE AUTHORS OF VIEWPOINTS DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THOSE OF THE JERUSALEM CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS.

sixty-day period. Nonetheless, Labor's passage of the bills even in a preliminary reading does constitute a setback for the government.

Significantly, there were coalition Members of Knesset who did not boycott the vote and joined the opposition in voting in favor of early elections. Among those who voted to dissolve the Knesset was Likud MK Dan Meridor. He is a senior Likud political figure and a former minister in both the Shamir and Netanyahu governments. Meridor resigned as finance minister last year because of his opposition to Netanyahu's leadership, but this was the first time he openly voted against the government and his party rather than abstain or absent himself from the plenum.

Three of the five MKs in David Levy's Geshet faction, united with the Likud party, also voted against the government. Similarly, three of the four coalition partner Third Way MKs joined the opposition, while party leader Minister Avigdor Kahalani absented himself from the vote. Third Way MK Alex Lubotsky said that his party's vote was a message to Netanyahu to make progress on the peace process.

This parliamentary ploy by the opposition to at least embarrass if not bring down the Netanyahu government was buried under a tidal wave of outrage and anger over ethnic slurs reviving the Sephardi-Ashkenazi divide of yesteryear.

The Ashkenazi-Sephardi Conflict Revisited

On the morning of what was supposed to be the Labor party's mini-triumph over the Netanyahu government, they found themselves facing widespread and virulent public and political outrage. Senior Labor MK Ori Orr was quoted in Israel's leading newspaper, *Ha'aretz*, making disparaging statements about the country's Sephardic community. Ori Orr is a distinguished general who served for over thirty years in the Israel Defense Forces. As a Labor MK, he served under Rabin and Peres as chairman of the prestigious Knesset Committee on Security and Foreign Affairs and as deputy minister of defense. Orr, in a lengthy interview, claimed that Sephardim, especially those from Morocco, "have no curiosity to know what's happening around them and why." He went on to accuse them of being unwilling to engage in self-criticism and not being able to deal with criticism of them. He went on to say that "it is impossible to have a normal conversation with a Sephardi MK because they always interpret even legitimate criticism as ethnically motivated." Of his military colleague and now Minister of Defense Yitzhak Mordechai, he said, "Mordechai

is the champion of complexes."

Orr's remarks drew far greater media attention than Labor's bill to dissolve the Knesset. Labor's hollow victory becomes virtually devoid of meaning given the irreparable damage to the party's electoral future. Indeed, Netanyahu probably would be more than happy to go to new elections at this time given this electoral windfall. Last September, Labor party Chairman Ehud Barak made a public apology to Israel's Sephardic community for "the pain and human suffering the party had caused them in the early days of the state." Barak went further by having an official resolution adopted by his party entitled "Recognition and Apology for Past Errors." His apology and resolution were part of a strategy to try to win back the support of Sephardi voters who, since Begin's victory in 1977, have been fervent Likud supporters.

Labor's Failed Attempt at Reconciliation

The apology and resolution by the Labor party generated a range of responses, from appreciation to cynicism to amusement. But MK Orr's interview in *Ha'aretz* has undermined any attempt at reconciliation between Labor and Israel's Sephardic ethnic community. Orr's racist slurs were politically incorrect as well as outrageous. "The problem," Orr claimed, "is that I cannot speak with these people like I do with others who are more Israeli in character. Every time you say something they immediately jump, are insulted and hurt, and begin to carry on."

Little wonder that Orr's remarks were immediately condemned in the strongest terms by leaders of all sectors of Israeli society up to and including President Ezer Weizman. Orr's party colleagues disowned him. They were furious with him. Labor MK Hagai Merom described Orr's statement as reminiscent of Le Pen's statements in France. Labor Party MK Salah Tarif, an Israeli Arab, labeled Orr's utterances as "pure racism." He went on to say that "Barak must expel him from the party. If he doesn't, I will not be able to remain a member of this party."

Meretz leader MK Yossi Sarid said that Orr's statements helped once again to save Prime Minister Netanyahu. After hearing Orr's apologies, which he claimed "only made the ugly uglier," he called for Orr to resign his seat in the Knesset. Even an organization of Druse army veterans sent Orr a letter of protest saying, "hearing this unfortunate expression against the Sephardic community makes us wonder what your real feelings are regarding the Druse, Beduin, Christians and Muslims who served under you in the army." And,

of course, Prime Minister Netanyahu, speaking in the Knesset plenum, was in top form, delivering a stinging assault upon the Labor party, despite repeated protests and interruptions by opposition MKs. Netanyahu clearly took advantage of Orr's statements to make political gain, pounding away at the Labor party for its patronizing and racist attitude. Twenty years after the Likud came to power by presenting itself as the defender of Sephardim against the old guard of secular Ashkenazi Mapai members, Labor (the descendent of Mapai) is still on the defensive.

Orr's folly clearly played into the hands of the prime minister. Netanyahu, supposedly speaking on the bill to dissolve the Knesset, used the opportunity to turn his accusers into the accused. His scornful remarks in an unrestrained attack upon the Labor party indicated that the ethnic issue in Israel still remains an open wound. Sephardi-Ashkenazi tensions still seem to be valuable currency in the political sphere, even though younger Israelis seem much less conscious of ethnic divisions. True, the Israeli establishment is still disproportionately Ashkenazi, but Sephardim have been able to achieve high offices in all fields of endeavor without this being dismissed as mere tokenism. Netanyahu illustrated this in his fiery speech, pointing out that half of his Cabinet is of Sephardi background, as well as the newly appointed Chief of Staff of the IDF.

Who Are the Real Israelis?

Even more harmful than the racial slurs was Orr's attempt to draw a distinction between us and them. He implied that there are some groups within Israeli society that are "less Israeli." This racism, accompanied by paternalism, has caused such damage that it is very difficult to even imagine how his military comrade and close political ally Ehud Barak can repair the political damage. Orr's resignation from the Knesset simply will not disabuse most Sephardim of their now confirmed suspicions about the prejudice and patronizing attitudes of the Labor party. Little wonder that MK Haim Ramon remarked that Netanyahu must be saying to himself, "there is a God, but he is a Likudnik."

Ori Orr's politically suicidal remarks are not so much the remarks of a racist as they are of a proud patriot who feels robbed of his country. Orr is part of that "WASP" elite in Israeli society that founded and built and defended the State of Israel. Israeli "WASPs" are White, Ashkenazi Socialists with *Protektzia*. They were the elite of yesteryear — the era of the Hagana and *halutzim* (pioneers), of the Histadrut and the kibbutzim. They dominated the important sectors of

Israeli society — the army, the media, the universities, the government, industry, business, and the labor unions. They were the power elite of Israeli society. They are the ones who led Israel's struggle for independence and salvaged the refugees from the DP camps in Europe and brought in the masses from North Africa, Iraq, and Yemen. Little wonder they saw themselves as saviors and patrons of those less fortunate of their brethren who found refuge in the homeland they provided. Israel's "WASPs" now feel they have had their country taken away from them by a bunch of ingrates.

The 1996 national election clearly showed the increased power, influence, and dominance of Israel's peripheries over what had traditionally been Israel's elite power core. Sephardim and the ultra-Orthodox haredim and Russian immigrants are the new color and substance at the center of Israeli cultural and political life. All three groups are the "them" as opposed to Ori Orr's "us." They constitute the new majority made up of minorities. The paradox is that the less Israeli one feels, the more likely he is to vote for the right-wing nationalist Likud party. Israeli identity is somehow seen as a creation of the left, which has defined Israel's character since the early days of the state and has used it to maintain dominance.

These "un-Israeli" peripheral communities have joined in a kind of alliance of alienated groups. The haredim live within their own self-imposed ghetto, while the new wave of immigrants from the former Soviet Union remain almost tribally secluded. Traditional immigrant bitterness has bonded with long harbored haredi hatred of left-wing Ashkenazi secularists and traditional Sephardi resentment of the patronizing Labor elitists who dominated and controlled them for so many years.

The Sephardim resent the more highly educated and cultured Russian Jews while the Russian Jews resent the religious coercion of the haredim. The haredim exclude the ultra-Orthodox Sephardim from their yeshivot and consider the Russian Jews as little more than pork-eating *goyim*. However, what brings them together is their common cause against the left-wing Ashkenazi secularist establishment.

Israel's New Power Elite

This strange coalition of the un-Israelis is forging a completely different Israeli identity. Under the umbrella of the current coalition government, this alliance of alienated groups has joined in the common cause of opposition to the Oslo peace process, which

they identify as the product of the Ashkenazi secularist Israeli elite. The frustration of Labor is palpable. The shift within the haredi camp, from a moderate to a right-wing nationalist position, combines with the messianism of Israel's national religious sector and the traditional anti-Arab views of much of the Sephardi community. Even more devastating to Labor's political hopes is the unexpected opposition of much of Israel's three quarter of a million Russian Jews to the peace process. Most Russian immigrants support the Likud position. The Russian immigrants are joining the two other alienated groups, Sephardim and haredim, to form a new political center. This coalition is built on shared resentment of the Labor-oriented elites in Israeli society, as well as on their shared hawkish tendencies.

Orr's slurs about Sephardim reflect the frustration of Israel's traditional power elite to adjust to the erosion of their dominance more so than the ethnic prejudice which does still permeate Israeli society. Orr rashly and foolishly spoke out in the name of an archaic and powerless Israeliness. The fact is, Orr even resents

American Jews. Back in October 1996, Orr was accused of prejudice against Israeli citizens who were not born there. He was then being critical of Prime Minister Netanyahu's English-speaking advisors. In an interview with Israel Radio he claimed that Netanyahu "places too much trust in English-speaking advisors instead of consulting with those who speak army-Hebrew, who serve in the field, and really know what's going on."

The Orr debacle probably reflects the clash of outsiders vs. insiders, old timers vs. newcomers, much more than any ethnic or racial conflict. What we are seeing is the passing of the old order as Israeli society reinvents itself, donning a new face while casting aside its previous culture with its myths, totems, and heroes.

* * *

David Clayman is a Fellow of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Director of the Israel Office of the American Jewish Congress.

Now available!

The first study of its kind conducted in the American Jewish community!

AMERICAN JEWISH LEADERS VIEW BOARD-STAFF RELATIONS

Gerald B. Bubis and Steven M. Cohen

This monograph probes the thinking of 830 national and local professional and volunteer leaders in UJA, CJP, UIA, Federations, Jewish Community Centers, Community Relations Councils, and Family Services. Based on a social scientific survey, it reports on the issues which most frequently cause difficulties between board and staff members including views on their respective power, how well they perform their jobs, and what they perceive as points of agreement and conflict.

NIS 45 — \$12.50