

Opinion

# Israel Against Democracy, Part 2: Post-Elections Analysis

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The recent elections in Israel were held, as in past years, in a climate of resignation. No big surprises were anticipated, and no one for a minute doubted that Benyamin Netanyahu would be elected for a historic third time. Even when the results were announced, the landslide victory of the new party, Yesh Atid [*there is a future*], led by media celebrity Yair Lapid, was hardly a surprise. It is the third time that a vaguely centrist party with a vaguely anti-religious, patriotic agenda takes a big chunk of the ‘average Israeli’ votes.<sup>1</sup> With 17 out of 120 Knesset seats, Yesh Atid has become the second biggest party in Israel overnight, second to the ruling party only. They were declared the ‘winners’ and the Netanyahu-Lieberman duo the ‘losers’, for losing a large portion of their mandate through the merger of Likud and Israel Beitenu.

The massive vote for Lapid, riding on a general discontent with politics, made it painfully clear how sectorial the ‘social justice’ protest in the summer of 2011 was after all, which drew primarily on middle-class frustrations with dwindling economic prospects for future generations. The amazing creativity and energy of many young and more radicalised 2011 protestors dissipated much too soon. Difficult yet promising alliances forged at the time between Mizrahi neighborhoods in Tel Aviv and Palestinian activists in Jaffa found no political expression. The summer of 2011 was a moment when hundreds of thousands poured to the streets to demonstrate against the rule of the so-called ‘tycoons’, Israel’s business oligarchy. This seemed to have the potential to lead to an even broader, more threatening mobilisation against the existing order. It didn’t happen. No serious opposition to the reign of the neoliberal hawkish right emerged from this outburst. The 2011 protest did not generate any visible crack in the tectonic structures of Israeli politics. The main players on the Israeli political map remain Netanyahu-Lieberman, a spineless, inflated center, and a disproportionately strong settler-dominated extreme right. Together, and with the ultra-orthodox parties in opposition for the first time in decades, they form the next coalition government. The so-called capital-rule [*Hon-Shilton*] nexus is under no serious threat, at least for the time being.

What remains to be seen is whether Yesh Atid, with its newcomers plucked from the media, cultural and business elite will manage to prevent this Knesset session from finishing off the attack on the liberal foundations of the state. In the past four years the Israeli parliament has

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<sup>1</sup> Kadima is today the smallest party in the Knesset with 2 seats. In its first elections in 2006 it took 29 seats to become the largest party within the coalition government. Shinuy party before it won 15 seats in 2003 and disappeared in the 2006 elections.

orchestrated a legislative blitz, introducing dozens of anti-democratic bills undermining basic rights, attacking minorities and civil society organisations in particular. The anti-Zionist left was the focus of concerted persecution. The vicious campaign was utterly disproportionate, considering how tiny, fragmented and largely politically disorganised the anti-Zionist left is. The new MKs of Yair Lapid, although a significant block, are inexperienced in dealing with the extreme-right legislators' tactical use of the law as a tool for political persecution and will have a difficult time matching their political cunning. Yair Lapid himself, in a gesture complacent with the extreme-right agenda, mocked Palestinian Member of Knesset Hanin Zoabi immediately after the elections, denouncing her as a political pariah. And so the question remains: will this patriotic center save the Israeli liberal order by pushing back racist legislation? Will it cooperate with political persecution or choose to protect the Palestinian minority against its own ethnocentric inclinations, merely for the sake of maintaining some semblance of the rule of law?

If the de-democratisation trend continues, it would be interesting to see what impact it will have on the twin pillars of the Israeli system of rule, namely, the Israeli dictatorship. I am referring here to the political system that the 'average Israeli' perceives as something external to themselves, existing in the twilight zone of the occupation, when in fact it is integral to the political order in Israel/Palestine as a whole. The 45-year-old denial of voting rights and rule over the Palestinian population was of course irrelevant to the Israeli media covering the elections. Mainstream US and international media, devoting pages towards the Jewish-Israeli 'left', 'center' and 'right', also completely ignored it. The irrelevance of the occupation to the Israeli voter in these free and democratic elections must be understood as being painstakingly manufactured. The occupation grinds on as if taking place in an unrelated, autonomous universe. During the week of the elections several so-called 'shooting incidents' occurred, in which four innocent civilians were killed in the West Bank. One of them was a 16-year-old boy, who was shot point-blank by soldiers near the separation wall south of Hebron. And just before the elections the army violently evacuated hundreds of Palestinian activists from the so-called 'E1 zone' in the West Bank, where they had erected a makeshift settlement to protest Netanyahu's plan to build more illegal Jewish settlements.

This new non-violent method of resistance in the occupied territories not only gave rise to a new social category – the Palestinian 'settler' – but more profoundly tore the mask of hypocrisy off the Israeli regime of separation, with its rigidly separate mechanisms of ruling over citizens (Jews and the Palestinian citizen minority) and disenfranchised out-groups (Palestinians in the occupied territories). The methodology employed by the Bab Al Shams activists draws attention to this dual system of rule specifically and makes its existence impossible to deny. The few times the state orchestrated an evacuation of Jewish settlers from 'illegal outposts', these were media spectacles showing soldiers shedding tears (rather than shooting tear gas) and hugging settlers in broad daylight. The violent beatings and mass arrests of the Palestinian settlers in the Bab Al Shams outpost, conversely, were conducted in the dead of night, and not before the army had first removed all Israeli and foreign journalists from the area in the usual dictatorial fashion.<sup>2</sup>

Israel's regime of separation must continuously separate the democratic from the dictatorial and conceal their relations of dependence, and ultimately their systemic unity. What would

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<sup>2</sup> The evacuation nevertheless caught international headlines: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jan/12/israel-palestinian-activists-e1-eviction>. For more information on the brutality of the evacuations see <http://electronicintifada.net/content/eviction-bab-al-shams-exposes-israel-lawless-state/12090>

happen, however, if the gradual erosion of the liberal order continues, and the democratic space for both Jews and Palestinians, who are luckily still somewhat protected by the democratic order, continues to shrink? Will it take its course until there is no liberal order to speak of? What would happen to a regime, whose entire edifice leans on the two pillars of democracy and dictatorship, if the democratic pillar collapses? Ironically, the de-democratisation process, which is marked by anti-democratic legislation, a sustained attack on basic civil liberties, the repression of dissent, the denial of cultural autonomy for minorities and the decimation of organised opposition, is a serious threat to the stability of the regime. It is threatening because it logically leads to a regime collapse, but what exactly would this regime collapse scenario entail? Critics of the Israeli regime argue that the occupation, combined with the ethnic cleansing ideologies and the racist agendas touted by candidates in the Israeli elections, make it difficult to call the Israeli 'democracy' anything but a façade for an apartheid system. Sceptics of Israeli democracy rightfully point out that a democracy for Jews only cannot be seriously called a democracy.<sup>3</sup> But what this perspective fails to appreciate is exactly how critical it is to the Israeli system of rule to maintain both democracy and dictatorship in tandem. What is lost is how democratic legitimisation enables the permanent dictatorship, not as a mere façade but as a fundamental logic of the state, a *raison d'état*. What follows then from the fact that liberal institutions and above all the parliament and elections are being turned into mere instruments of brute force is some sort of a totalitarian fascist mobilisation. In such a scenario there is no room for disagreement, no vaguely centrist middle ground, and only one shade of extreme right. We are then faced with a sovereign that declares itself to be beyond the law, representing directly the 'will of the people.' Israel indeed puts the *demos* above the law often enough to deserve the label of crypto-fascist state. But my idea is that what this analysis ultimately entails is different from what defines the current regime of separation, operating within the logic of inclusive exclusion, the logic of control and containment. For, when Israel becomes a truly fascist state, it is likely to transform itself into a regime operating with a totally different logic: the logic of cleansing, and taken to its most logical extreme – of genocide. In my careful estimation, notwithstanding the indiscriminate shooting of civilians and the killing of 140 civilians in Gaza this October, we are not quite there yet.

Sure enough, the scenario of mass fascist mobilisation (perhaps as a backlash of the progressive mobilisation of the summer of 2011) is not entirely implausible. Yet it seems remotely likely also because the white middle-class Yair Lapid voters, the everyday type of 'salt of the earth' patriots, are all major beneficiaries of the status quo. Any change to the status quo is going to be perceived as unfairly aggravating their 'share of the burden' to use a Yesh Atid-like slogan. It will be resisted as unnecessarily steering the country away from what this rather homogenous group covets for securing a Western OECD-level quality of life. So there is reason to believe that with their 17 seats in the Knesset, Yesh Atid will be compelled to put up a strong fight for maintaining the status quo if only to block the deterioration of the liberal order and the collapse of the regime of separation. More than anything, this election proved that Israeli society is not yet ready for the alternative scenario, one in which society enters the permanent crisis that Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci identified as 'terminal', a trigger for 'crossing a regime threshold.'<sup>4</sup> Mass mobilisation in 2011 did not generate such a political crisis. It did not lead to the emergence of new resistance to the powers that be or to new power blocs. In fact, the recent elections buried the existing chance of hegemonic change, though hopefully not for good. For the majority of Jewish-Israelis the

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<sup>3</sup> For academic critical perspective challenging the definition of democracy see Oren Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy, Land and Identity Politics in Israel/Palestine*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. For a journalistic perspective see Ben White, *Palestinians in Israel, Segregation, Discrimination and Democracy*, Pluto Press, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> A. Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, Ed. Louis Marks, New York: International Publishers 1957, p. 169 & 184.

recognition that the current regime of separation is evil and unsustainable and that a more just and inclusive democratic order must come about is beyond the pale, not something that in Gramsci's terms they can 'identify' with. Instead, in this election, despite strong undercurrents of criticism directed at the current socio-economic order, perhaps the most radical to date, many more chose to passively accept the existing political order as fait accompli.

This is not to say that there is no alternative reading of the political reality. It does exist, and is largely shared within the milieu of Israeli civil society organizations, but it is not widely shared beyond its narrow confines. This alternative reading demands that Jewish-Israelis give up their special privileges as Jewish citizens of the Jewish state. Most Israelis cannot identify with this, not simply because they are too racist, crudely put, but because they do not consider themselves as particularly privileged. As Israeli sociologist Nissim Mizrahi succinctly put it, for many, the only card they can play to better their situation is the claim that the state is theirs.<sup>5</sup> We have to ask why: why is Israeli civil society perceived as representing nothing but itself, and the socio-economic privilege of its members? Why are the critical perspective and the democratic alternative it promotes so vehemently rejected? Why has civil society played such a minor role in the summer of 2011 protests, and why have we not managed to connect the popular struggle for social justice to the struggle to end the occupation? Why have we not been able to produce entrepreneurs of hegemonic change with an agenda that can actually convince the majority that dismantling the dictatorship and truly democratising Israel/Palestine is the way forward? I have no clear answer to these questions, only some painful realisations. Firstly, that progressive forces in Israel need to find a more authentic language for political opposition than the lofty language of universalisms and human rights, which rings hollow to so many ears. Secondly, that Israeli civil society must look critically at its own usefulness and contribution to the separation regime and the maintenance of the status quo. Finally, and most devastatingly, we must consider that even while undergoing this process of self-reflection, a future scenario of a terminal crisis leading to a process of genuine democratisation may not involve Israeli civil society in any meaningful way.

I do not wish to paint here a picture of Israeli society and its civil society as immune to change and under the firm grasp of the current regime. One should always consider the opposite: that the regime is relatively stable but that there are already social undercurrents strong enough to constantly threaten its stability from within. I believe that we can speak of a movement in the direction of 'terminal crisis' in the Gramscian sense only if and when opposition from within Israeli society joins that from out-groups in the occupied territories. Moreover, it is imperative that we look at the state of the Israeli liberal democracy as a sort of seismographic indication for the stability of the regime. At the moment it seems that the incurable contradictions of democracy and dictatorship have not matured yet into a full-blown crisis, a political earthquake. To end on a more hopeful note, in case the process of elimination of Israel's liberal democracy continues after the elections, this process will inevitably bring us closer to the moment of truth. If the extreme right in power successfully completes its mission, it will unwittingly bring down the separation regime. This will be a clear wake-up call for mass mobilisation. This time for a whole new order, fascist or not.

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<sup>5</sup> N. Mizrahi, "Why are most Human Rights Activists Ashkenazi?" *Makor Rishon*, 11 May 2012 (In Hebrew).