

Autumn Politics in Jerusalem

by Michael Curtis



Old Father Israeli President Reuven Rivlin checked so there'd be no doubt, then proudly pronounced on September 23, 2019 'tis autumn, the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. The falling leaves in Jerusalem were drifting, and all fruit in Israel was being filled with ripeness to the core, but Israeli politics was mingled with pain. The election for the Knesset a few days earlier was not only inconclusive with no obvious winner and continuing political uncertainty, but also heralded developments that may make the formation of a stable government even more uncertain. The political citizenry in Israel does not accept the view that warm days will never cease. Rather, there is the longing for the bright steadfast star to show the way.

Where are the songs of Spring? Do not think of them. Autumn has its own music, exhibiting maturity, ripeness, inevitable change, old age and decay, and the uncertainty of life. That

uncertainty was shown once again in Israeli political life as the current results of 4.4 million votes in the Knesset election show. Assuming possible major combinations , there are two: one roughly center-left led by Benny Gantz (Blue and White which got 1.1 million votes, 25.9%, and 33 seats, Labor-Gesher 212,000 votes, 4.8%, and 6 seats, Democratic Union 190,000 votes, 4.3%, and 5 seats) , and the other right of center led by Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu (Likud 1.1 million votes, 25%, and 31 seats, Shas 330,000 votes, 7.4%, and 9 seats, UTJ 270,000 votes, 6.0%, and 8 seats, Yamina, 260,000 votes , 5.8%, and 7 seats). The stalemate means neither side has enough support to form a government, and the search for allies to join a coalition government that can control at least 61 seats. The search is over the rainbow, for a broad spectrum of parties.

President Rivlin has stated he favors a coalition government including both Blue and White and Likud. People , he declared, will be disgusted by the prospect by a third election in a year.

The search is made even more complicated by a number of new as well as old factors: the possible indictment by the Attorney-General of present and long term prime minister Benjamin, Netanyahu, on fraud and bribery allegations; the uncertain attitude of Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu party which got 310,000 votes, 7%, and 8 seats and was once thought to be the kingmaker; the tension over the religious issue and the ultra-Orthodox , Haredi; and the greater assertiveness by the Joint Arab List, which got 470,000 votes, 10.6%, and 13 seats.

The would-be kingmaker Avigdor Lieberman has withheld support for either Netanyahu or Gantz, but remains primarily concerned for a secular system, one excluding ultra-Orthodox and Arabs. His slogan is that "only Lieberman can prevent a theocracy." In response, the Ultra leaders state they do not intend to impose any religious laws on the general population. But a

central factor in this difference of outlook is the insistence of Lieberman on a bill that would make Ultra men eligible to participate in mandatory Israeli military service.

Tension was strong with the introduction and debate on the minimarkets (supermarkets) bill which requires convenience stores and groceries to close on the Sabbath, a bill that passed on January 9, 2018 by 58-57, the margin of one being an indication of growing tension and unresolved differences.

About 75% of the Israeli population is Jewish, compared to 20% Arab.

Though freedom of religion is respected, tensions exist between the Haredi, strict adherents to their interpretation of Jewish law and values, usually referred to as Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox, and non-Haredi Jews. The significant social difference is the Haredi males are full time Talmudic scholars, and are therefore exempt from military service in the IDF. The number of those exempt has been increasing, to the unhappiness of secular Israelis.

The Haredi are mainly represented by two political parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, UTJ.

Shas, Sephardi Guards, was founded in 1984 by former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Rav Ovadiah Yosef with its own Council of Torah Sages. Its adherents were mostly Sephardic Jews drawn from Middle East countries who had not experienced the changes in ritual and behavior in Jewish movements in Western Europe or the U.S. They were viewed by the more secular Ashkenazi Jews as lacking the factors needed for integration into a modern society. The main religious movements, Aguddet Israel and the Mizrachi, later to become the National Religious Party, had few Sephardim in their leadership.

Shas took part in an election for the first time in 1984, winning four seats in the Knesset.

Shas set up its own government-funded educational system, and advocated a state based on halakha, Jewish religious law. At first it took a moderate stance on the conflict with Palestinians, but it opposed any stopping of settlement activity in the West Bank. Shas won 17 seats in 1999, even though its leader Aryeh Deri had been convicted on corruption charges. It did less well in 2003, winning only 11 seats, but after the 2009 election when it won 11 seats, the party joined the coalition formed by Netanyahu and got four positions in the government.

However, Deri rejoined the party for the 2013 election, and Shas won 11 seats, but decided not to enter the government, because of proposals to conscript haredi in national service, and to reduce state funding for haredi families. But it changed its mind and in 2015 Shas won 7 seats and Deri joined the government. In 2019 it appears to have won 9 seats.

United Torah Judaism, UTJ, was formed in 1992, an alliance between two ultra-Orthodox political parties, Agudat Israel and Degel HaTorah. Its objectives are clear; no separation of religion and state, and no drafting of ultra-Orthodox men for military service, and maintaining bans on businesses opening on Sabbath and holidays. It has benefited from financial aid, including stipends for large families.

On external affairs, its attitude is more related to religious concerns than to security or diplomatic ones. Yet it is willing to join coalition governments that will engage in peace negotiations, and joined coalitions in 2004 and 2009.

These differences make formation of a coalition difficult though not impossible. However, the after effects of the September 2019 election may be a watershed moment in Israeli politics, and the new kingmaker may be the Arab parties. Traditionally, Arab parties have not endorsed any one to lead the country, but the Joint Arab List on September 22, 2019 decided to "recommend," though not endorse, Benny Gantz to

become prime minister, since their major objective was to oust Bibi. Less important for them was criticism of Gantz for his role as military leader of the war in Gaza in 2014.

Israeli Arabs, now number 1.9 million, 20% of the population, and less well off economically than other Israelis. In 2019 a Joint List of four Arab parties was officially reestablished with Ayman Odeh, head of Hadash party, as leader. In the September 2019 election it obtained 13 seats, and, significantly, the Arab turnout was 59 %, 10 point higher than in April 2019, making it arguably the largest opposition group in the Knesset. In that case, the 44 year old Odeh, would then get monthly briefings from Mossad, meet visiting heads of state, voice in government complaints of discrimination, and call for direct negotiations with Palestinians, and a Palestinian state.

Odeh heralds a move of Arab politics from a politics of protest to a politics of influence with the weight of Arab citizens. Arab parties have not recommended a candidate for PM since Yitzhak Rabin in 1992. Odeh recommended Gantz in his concern to remove Bibi from power, and stopping a right wing coalition, although Gantz does not want Odeh in his cabinet. He did not “endorse” Gantz because Gantz has not committed to Arab legitimate political demands. Odeh’s decision was not unanimous since at least 3, members of the Balad party, of the 13 elected did not agree with his recommendation.

Will autumn turn to winter in Israeli politics? The confident declarations by Odeh are messages for changes in policy: full and equal participation of “Arab Palestinians” (sic), an end to demolition of illegally built Arab houses, and softening of regulations against illegal building in Arab areas. Arabs are 20% of the population though only 16% of the electorate, and are younger than other Israelis, and therefore will be a larger part of the electorate in the future. Moreover, the question remains that over 200,000 Arabs live in east Jerusalem, but are not Israeli citizens.

Problems are there in abundance, and the aura of invincibility of Netanyahu may be fading, but the Israeli system is not in ultimate decline, nor concerned with death. But the mainstream parties, and the Trump Administration, should be aware of and be cautious about the declarations of increasing Arab power.