

## **Dispatch from Israel - The Electoral Process**

With only a few days away until elections in Israel, the mood of the Israeli electorate seems to be “anyone other than Netanyahu.” It is difficult for an American to zero in precisely on what is going on and why. People want someone with hope, or at least somebody who will give them hope. They want a unifier. They do not want someone with a smirk, who can give good lectures to the American Congress or to someone whose rhetoric is majestic. Rather, they want reasonably priced cottage cheese, affordable places to live and the same quality of life that they believe people enjoy in other Western democracies. Probably they have it better here than most other civilized nations in the world but Israelis are always looking to achieve something more and better.

Netanyahu has become a divisive force. While the Israelis respect Netanyahu’s speaking out for Israel on issues of security, and while they seem to agree with him on most of those issues, the feeling is that he does it in a way which is alienating and does not further the international interests of Israel. Israeli society is so diverse that it is even difficult for Americans which traditionally have had their own “melting pot” to appreciate the matrix here. In America, while there is much diversity, there is also much separation and a lack of heterogeneity within communities. Generally speaking black people live in black communities, white people live in white communities, Asians live in Asian communities and there is not much mixture between the cultures except when they must mix at the workplace. In Israel, people must live in close physical proximity because the country is so small. For example, the third largest party block in Israel are Arabs. The Arab block generally does not even support the existence of a Jewish state, and yet they serve in the Knesset, they vote, they receive affirmative action and in some cases they have benefits superior to other Israeli citizens. That would be something unheard of in America. Who could possibly get elected to Congress who did not support the country?

So it seems as though there certainly will be a change in Israel. Israel has always lurched between the left and the right. There is a strong labor movement and a strong underlying socialist sentiment. The term “socialism” which has become a dirty word in America, represents in Israel a desire to see people economically uplifted and a sense of fairness that Israelis believe all citizens deserve. Israelis do not think of “socialism” the way Americans do. Americans talk about income “redistribution” when they talk about socialism. That is a term not even heard of in Israel. What socialism means here is equity, fairness, diversity and all those good values that make up what might properly be called “biblical democracy.”

On foreign affairs, most Israelis appreciate Netanyahu’s sounding alarm on Iran and the palpable dangers from almost every side of the country. In the north there is Hezbollah backed by Iran which controls Lebanon. In the northeast there are terrorist groups like ISIS that essentially control Syria. Jordan may very well be shaky given the number of Syrian refugees in that country. In the south there is Hamas in Gaza and Sinai. Although Sinai is Egyptian, it is a region in turmoil. Israel is, in the words of Bob

Dylan, “surrounded by pacifists who all want peace.” Yet, as Dylan observed, they wait at night for this “bully to fall asleep.” In spite of these dangers surrounding the country, Israelis would seem to opt for a leader who is not a Cassandra and does not want to frighten the people but yet wants to keep the military strong while uplifting the economy and talking nice to foreign leaders. Criticizing the likes of Obama, as well as the leaders of Germany, France and the European Union maybe “feel good” for some and even for the Prime Minister, but the question is what tangible results do they bring?

Those outside of Israel must not mistake the sentiment of the Israeli people or why they do not favor Netanyahu. They are not ready to carve up Israel and give it away to various terrorists and neo-terrorist groups. They are not interested in abolishing the religious basis of Zionism. Israelis are not ready to turn over the country to the voting minority of Arabs within Israel. What Israelis are ready for is a new attitude of a smile and a handshake even when they have to say, “no” to America and the European Union. There are ways of having a fight with your best friend where you do not take your finger and poke him in the eye. Israelis, though at times testy and a bit abrasive themselves, know how to get along in a hostile world. They want their Prime Minister to know how to get along in a hostile world and enhance their security not only through military might and strong verbiage, but also through diplomatic channels. They do not see Netanyahu as having accomplished any diplomatic fence mending. Perhaps that is impossible in a world dominated by renewed anti-Semitism and anti-democracy. Perhaps the Americans and Europeans talk about diversity and freedom for every place except Israel. Nevertheless, Israelis cling to hope that they can live in a diverse democratic free and civilized world while still protecting their own physical integrity. Will the rest of the world recognize that?

It appears that Benjamin Netanyahu and his generation of what some Israelis would call “fear mongers” are going down to defeat. Nevertheless, don’t count out the “right wing” in Israeli politics. The polls show that the average Israeli is still willing to accept Netanyahu as a leader, although they are not happy with his interpersonal affect and they tend to vote Labor on social issues. Netanyahu has shown himself to be a strong and willing fighter. The polls have not yet opened and there may still be a major change in public sentiment.

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