

A playbook for stopping Israel's demographic tidal wave

by

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With birth rates that are double to triple those of Israel's remaining population groups, the country's extremist parties may appear to be on the road to eventual control regardless of what happens with the current judicial coup attempt. But there is a way for a liberal democracy to defend itself.

To avoid the possibility of going to prison, the criminal defendant heading the Likud was left with no political alternative but to lead his party into a coalition with five parties representing an extremist strand of Judaism that discriminates against women, minorities, and many others – a type of Judaism that runs counter to the basic values set forth in the Jewish state's Declaration of Independence. Consequently, the recent elections provided Israel with a five alarm warning about an approaching demographic tidal wave that is intensifying. We have received a preview of where they plan to take the country when they will one day constitute a majority of the population that will no longer need Netanyahu to form a government.

While secular and traditional Jews, Druze and Christian Arabs average fewer than two and a half children per family, and the birth rate among Muslim-Israelis is declining rapidly, approaching three children per family, the religious Jews average more than four children while the Haredim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) average 6.6 children per family. As a general rule, the share of the Haredim in the population doubles every 25 years, i.e. every generation. In other words, the Haredim make up only six percent of the 50-year-olds, but 24% of the infants. As a result of this exponentially increasing growth rate, half of Israel's babies are expected to belong to Haredi families in just 25 years.

The five parties joining the Likud in the coalition are the embodiment of intolerance toward others. The religious political parties are heavily involved in Israel's religious school system while Haredi political parties completely control the content in their schools, providing an education that is more akin to indoctrination. The result is wave after wave of adults – and in the future, a tidal wave – under immense communal pressure to not know or think differently from what is dictated to them, who do not understand or care about the consequences of their actions, and who treat with contempt all other lifestyles and beliefs.

It is possible that the struggle to preserve Israel's liberal democracy has already been lost, though I believe that there is still a chance – with the probabilities for success declining rapidly each year – to curb the demographic tidal wave. The key to doing so lies within two policy realms that no Israeli leader (thus far) has been willing to put on center stage. While the reasons for this reticence might be understandable, the tidal wave is advancing toward us at an increasing pace. Policies that might have been possible to implement gradually in the '90s are no longer an option today. In any event, it is important to point out that the two proposed policy overhauls are not targeted against any specific group. Instead, they aim to improve Israel's general standard of living and reduce inequality within the country – while also addressing the incoming demographic tidal wave.

1. Overhauling Israel's very sub-par education system: Israeli pupils' proficiency in basic subjects (math, science and reading) is below every single developed country. This result, from the most recent PISA exam, is not due to the Haredi students because most of them do not study the material and do not participate in the tests (which would have lowered the national score even further). The average level of knowledge exhibited by students in the state-religious education stream is below 80% of the developed countries, while Arab-Israelis scored below many third world countries (and below nine out of the ten Muslim countries that participated in the tests).

A complete overhaul of Israel's education system must be based on three key components: (a) a significant upgrade of the core curriculum; (b) a major change in the way teachers are selected, trained and compensated; and (c) a comprehensive reform in the functioning of the Education Ministry and the schools. Without expanding here on the last two components, the upgraded core curriculum needs to provide all Israeli children with the basic tools to work in a global economy and a basic understanding of the primary tenets underlying liberal democracies. While additional areas of study such as art, sports, science, religion, etc., can reflect local communal preferences and lifestyles, the core curriculum must be uniform and mandatory for all Israeli children. Not a single shekel should be budgeted to a school that does not fully comply with these conditions.

2. Overhauling Israel's benefits system: Despite appearances to the contrary, the government's budget is not transparent. On the face of it, there are thousands of itemized budget items. However, in practice, it is not possible to group the various budget items by topic. For example, how much money does Israel spend to meet the demands of sectoral interests such as the Haredim and the settlers, and what is this money being spent on? After all, formal welfare benefits are only a small part of the story. Some money is paid directly and some money is provided indirectly, in the form of subsidies and discounts in property taxes, education, etc. – much of it completely unrelated to the household's income. For example, how is it possible that the share of home ownership among Haredim, one of Israel's poorest population groups, is so much higher than that of other groups who are also poor – and even above populations in much higher income brackets? Where does their money come from?

A significant upgrade in education will not only improve the standard of living of those receiving a better education; it will also raise national living standards. Along the way, the overall tax burden could be reduced, while a greater number of people would participate in shouldering that burden. One important byproduct is that more educated people tend to have fewer children. This tendency will be further reinforced by the significant reduction in benefits to able-bodied adults, thus obligating parents to take responsibility for their lives and become accountable for the number of children that they can support. This, in turn, will also motivate them to obtain the tools necessary for working in a competitive economy and preserving a liberal democracy. Consequently, the demographic tidal wave will be curbed – or at least its components will no longer pose a risk to Israel's future.

The above ideas may sound too ambitious to implement – but what other alternatives do we have to avoid the tidal wave that will drown everything here in a few decades? The hope is that after the coming elections, the massive energy of the public protests can be channeled to establish

a broad government from the democratic side of the aisle, one that includes right and left, religious and secular, Jews and Arabs – all those who understand the gravity of the hour and the need to transcend their day-to-day differences in order to return Israel to a sustainable long-term path.

Both sides – the current government and its opponents – have something to learn from the Japanese and the Americans in World War II. Drunk with power after conquering China and large parts of Southeast Asia, the Japanese perceived the Americans in 1941 as an indulgent society that had become content and soft. They thought that if they initiated a devastating attack on the Americans on an unprecedented scale, the “decadent” Americans would not leave their comfort zones to chase the Japanese through the jungles, island after island after island, to fight for their way of life. What tyrants do not understand is that a free people is in no rush to hand over the keys to its freedom. That is what Netanyahu and company are learning today.

But there is a lesson here for the other side as well. The Americans at that time understood something else: a liberal democracy must not compromise with those who are intolerant of others. In such situations, there is no such thing as each side giving a little to reach a lasting settlement since the intolerant side does not respect anyone else’s rights – by definition – and considers such agreements to be temporary stepping stones on the road to attaining its ultimate objectives. Only total victory by the liberal side can be viable in the long term. Thanks to American unwillingness to compromise on the conditions for ending the war, the terms that they dictated enabled the Japanese to discover freedom and become one of the most prosperous and peace-seeking countries in the world. In the Israeli context, we need to understand that there can be no compromise with those who use democracy in order to destroy it.

There was once a religious-secular “status quo” in Israel. Those in power today have trashed whatever remained of it. They have shown that, while it is possible to be religious in a liberal country, it is not possible to be a liberal in a religious country – and that is what’s on the line today in Israel. Therefore, the new rules must be written by those who understand and believe in the basic foundations of a liberal democracy and the need to maintain a modern global economy. Those trying to overturn the system today will have to learn to live with the new status quo and adjust themselves. In the end, after the cold turkey, they will enjoy the freedom to determine their personal paths in life, paths that do not come at the expense of those around them.

The vision for the day after this current government must become publicly available today. Otherwise, we may win today’s battle, only to then discover that the persons whom we need to win the war have in the meantime left the country. The total number of persons employed in hi-tech (who keep Israel’s economy in the developed world), plus all of the physicians (who ensure developed world healthcare), plus all the senior faculty in the research universities (who teach the hi-tech leaders and the physicians) comprise just over 400,000 people. In a country with nearly 10 million people, a few tens of thousands – possibly just a few thousand – in a number of critical occupations are the tip of the spear that keeps Israel in the developed world. If these people lose hope, if they believe that even if we win the current battle, we will not be able to survive the approaching tidal wave, then many of them will not remain in Israel. The country will not collapse immediately, but that major loss will accelerate the process of further losses – and the arrival of what will then be an inevitable demographic tidal wave.

Israel has never experienced protests at today’s magnitude. With so many people taking to the streets to save their home, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity. Stopping the judicial coup is just the first step. We need leaders who show that they understand Israel’s long-term

challenges and that they are ready to implement the vision – however difficult it may be – to deal with them.

In order to make it more difficult for subsequent governments to overturn the systemic overhauls in education and benefits, the vision must include a change in our system of government (to one in which cabinet ministers actually understand what their ministries do, to an executive branch capable of implementing its decisions and enforcing laws, and to the implementation of effective checks and balances between the three branches of government), and pass a constitution to set in stone the national foundations that will protect the country for at least the next two or three decades – until the overhauls in education and benefits begin to diminish the demographic tidal wave.

The sooner such a vision can be promulgated, the greater the chance of sowing the hope that there is a light at the end of the tunnel – one that will keep people in Israel and increase their motivation to fight for the Jewish people's only home until they have brought it to a safe haven.